“The City That Didn’t Matter”

Perceptions of the State, Neoliberalism and Injustice in the Flint Water Crisis

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

This is a study on the Flint water crisis and lead poisoning and its effects for the city residents. It focuses on the relationship between the locals and the state and explores how that relationship was formed and transformed during the crisis. It examines the historical and economic background of the water crisis, suggesting that the situation should be seen as a man-made disaster caused by the state of Michigan. The main research questions revolve around the twofold process of the state – citizen interaction and the state's role in the crisis: How do the residents of Flint perceive the state during the water crisis? How did the city's history of economic difficulties affect in the background of the water crisis' emergence?

This study contributes to the growing anthropological discussion about the role of the state and its governance, proposing a tragic example of what can happen when financial stability is placed above everything else, democratic decision-making disregarded and when the adopted neoliberal governance forms exacerbate local injustice and marginalization. The study also contributes to the discussions of water management, disasters and environmental injustice.

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Flint, Michigan between February and April of 2018. It is based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with locals, supplemented by following the local media, reading historical accounts and attending events in the city. The interviews were conducted with a total of 15 core research participants (8 male, 7 female) and they came from a variety of social and economic backgrounds.

The thesis suggests that the residents perceive the state as an unjust force from the above, systematically disregarding the struggling city. They see the state as having a role of historically producing poverty, vulnerability and abandonment through economic mismanagement, deindustrialization and neoliberal policies. The residents blame the state for governing the city as if it was a business, thus focusing on cutting costs and placing economic interests above human safety. After the state adopted undemocratic policies such as emergency management and stripped the city of its voice, the residents lost their trust in the integrity of the officials and the protection the state is supposed to offer its citizens. This thesis demonstrates how a focus on state processes and state-citizen interaction can provide useful insights for understanding both natural and human-made disasters and the unequal living conditions produced by them.

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Flint, Michigan, United States, state, neoliberalism, water, disaster, citizenship, democracy, environmental justice

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Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee Flintin vesikriisiä ja sen vaikutuksia kaupungin asukkaisiin. Tutkielma keskittyy kaupunkilaisten ja (osa)valtion väliseen suhteeseen ja tutkii, miten tämä suhde muodostui ja muuttui vesikriisin aikana. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan vesikriisin taustalla vaikuttaneita historiallisia ja taloudellisia muutoksia ja osoitetaan, kuinka vesikriisi tulisi nähdä valtion ja sen päättäjien aikaansaamana katastrofina. Tutkimuskysymykset keskittyvät valtion ja kansalaisten väliseen vuorovaikutukseen ja valtion prosesseihin: Millaisena toimijana Flintin asukkaat näkevät valtion vesikriisin aikana? Miten kaupungin historian taloudelliset vaikeudet vaikuttivat kriisin syntyyn?

Tutkielma osallistuu yhä kasvavaan antropologiseen tutkimukseen valtioista, niiden roolista ja hallinnoinnista. Tutkielma kuvaa konkreettisen esimerkin kautta mitä voi tapahtua, kun taloudellinen tasapaino nostetaan tärkeimmäksi asiaksi, demokraattinen päätöksenteko sivuutetaan ja miten uusliberalistiset hallinnointikäytännöt voivat pahentaa jo olemassa olevaa paikallista eriarvoisuutta ja marginalisaatiota. Lisäksi tutkielma osallistuu keskusteluihin vedenhallinnasta, katastrofeista ja ympäristöoikeudesta.

Tutkimuksen perustana on etnografinen kenttätyö Flintissä, Michiganissa helmi-huhtikuussa 2018. Tutkimus perustuu tuona aikana tehdylle osallistuvalle havainnoinnille ja puolistrukturoiduille haastatteluille, joita täydennettiin mediaseurannan, kaupungin historiaan perehtymisen ja paikallisiin tapahtumiin osallistumisen avulla. Tutkimukseen osallistui yhteensä 15 ydinhaastateltavaa (8 miestä, 7 naista), jotka kaikki tulivat erilaisista sosioekonomisista taustoista.

Tutkielman analyysi osoittaa, että kaupungin asukkaat näkevät valtion ylhäältä päin toimivana, epäoikeudenmukaisena voimana, joka systemaattisesti jätti kaupunkilaiset huomiotta päätöksenteossa. Paikalliset kokevat, että valtiolla on historiallisesti ollut suuri rooli köyhyyden ja haavoittuvuuden luomisessa ja kaupungin taloudellisessa ja sosiaalisessa hylkäämisessä. Teollisuuden purkaminen (deindustrialization) alueelta ja valtion harjoittamat uusliberalistiset toimintamallit loivat Flintiin otolliset olosuhteet vesikriisin synnylle.

Asukkaat syyttävät valtiota siitä, että se hallinnoi kaupunkia kuin yritystä, sillä se panosti ennen kaikkea taloudellisten kustannusten leikkaamiseen ja asetti säästötavoitteet kaupunkilaisten turvallisuuden ja hyvinvoinnin edelle. He kokevat, että valtio toimi epädemokraattisesti, kun se määräsi Flintille hätätilapäällikön (emergency manager) vastaamaan kaupungin taloudesta. Hätätilapäällikön määrääminen vei kaupunginhallitukselta ja paikallisilta mahdollisuudet vaikuttaa heitä koskeviin päätöksiin, minkä seurauksena kaupunkilaiset menettivät luottamuksensa valtioon ja sen kykyyn suojella kansalaisiaan. Tutkielma osoittaa, kuinka valtion ja kansalaisten välisen suhteen tutkiminen ja huomioiminen voi auttaa meitä ymmärtämään niin luonnollisia kuin ihmisten aiheuttamiakin katastrofeja ja niiden synnyttämää eriarvoisuutta.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
Flint, Michigan, Yhdysvallat, valtio, uusliberalismi, vesi, katastrofi, kansalaisuus, ympäristöoikeus

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List of acronyms

EM - Emergency Manager

LCR - Lead and Copper Rule

MDEQ - Michigan Department of Environmental Quality

EPA - United States Environmental Protection Agency

TTHM - Total trihalomethanes

KWA - Karegnondi Water Authority

DWSW - Detroit Water and Sewerage Department

1 Introduction

"The day that anthropologists give up their attempt to ground meanings in politics and economics will be a sad day. The loss will be not so much for themselves as for the social sciences in general."
- Mary Douglas, Risk and Blame

Imagine turning on the faucet in your kitchen to have a glass of water on a warm spring day. But you notice that instead of being transparent like water should be, the liquid in your glass is brown and it smells of sewage. You quickly pour the water back into the sink, frowning. In the evening, the same thing happens as you are about to fill the tub and enjoy a bath. Something is not right with the water, you have a gut feeling of it, but you do not yet know that you will be forced to stop using the water and your city will soon make national and international headlines because of its undrinkable water.

According to the World Health Organization, a staggering 2.1 billion people in the world lack access to safe drinking water and it is estimated that by 2025, half of the world's population will live in water-stressed areas (WHO 2019). The example above is not a historical event, a temporary catastrophe in a developing country several years ago, but an example of what people in Flint, Michigan, told me they were experiencing as recently as in the spring of 2014. In this thesis I look at the Flint water crisis and the city's lead poisoning from an anthropological perspective, focusing on the relations between the state and the Flint residents. I also construct a bigger picture of the historical forces behind the catastrophe. I propose that the situation should be seen as more than just "a water crisis", as an all-encompassing disaster caused by Michigan state officials who governed the economically struggling city by a neoliberal mindset, valuing finances above human health and safety.

The slow responses of local, state and federal officials, as well as their negation of the issue, further prolonged the crisis and the lead exposure of the city residents. The lead poisoning of the almost 100 000 people of Flint in turn contributed to the growing lack of trust for the state and its democratic practices. The water crisis happened (and is still happening) in a political and economic landscape dominated by neoliberalism — an ideology at the root of the crisis which values the operation of the free market. In a neoliberal operating environment, citizens are stripped of their voice and their distrust for the state is fueled by deceit and undemocratic practices.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the Flint residents' mundane feelings towards and perceptions of the state and its practices. How did the water crisis affect their everyday life? Who do they blame for the issue? How do they see the state and its practices affecting them? How did their belief in democracy and trust toward the state officials crumble during the crisis? I propose that in the case of Flint, the locals see the state as producing vulnerable subjects through its processes of neoliberalism, austerity and economic and social abandonment. The mismanagement, indifference and downright violence practiced by the state has throughout decades led to Flint being a disinvested and poor city, a suitable candidate for the kind of man-made disaster that the water crisis is. My research data supports this argument, as all of my informants brought up the different levels of state-sanctioned abandonment, a view of Flint and its residents not being worthy enough to be protected from crises like this.

1.1 Research questions and perspective of the study

My research questions are:

1. How do the residents of Flint perceive the state during the water crisis?
2. How did the city's history of economic difficulties affect in the background of the water crisis' emergence?

Both my research questions will be answered throughout my thesis, the explanations even overlapping each other, as the topics of the state and economics are intrinsically linked together. For my first question I have formulated a few subsidiary questions that help me construct my answer: “What kind of interaction between the state and the residents was going on during the crisis?” and “How do the residents see themselves as defined and valued by the state?” I will provide an in-depth understanding of the relationship between the residents and the state, emphasizing its role not just during the immediate crisis, but throughout Flint’s history. My second question takes up that history part of the crisis and in answering that I explore the link between a neoliberal state and an economically struggling city.

I provide answers to these questions based on the data gathered during my eight-week long fieldwork in Flint in the winter of 2018, which included discussions and interviews with my research participants, analyses of these discussions, participant observation in the city and some historical accounts of Flint’s evolution during the past centuries.

I propose that the state, in my thesis theorized precisely as the state of Michigan, was according to my informants the main culprit for the water crisis. I argue that the locals construct a picture of the state through their everyday interactions with it and its officials. These interactions are things such as being lied to about the water quality, the officials refusing to switch back to the original water source and conducting biased water tests. Through these practices my informants construct a perception of the state as being a force acting from the above in undemocratic ways and disregarding their complaints and health issues in order to govern the city with a neoliberal mindset.

However, as will become clear further in my thesis, the state cannot and should not be seen as a coherent actor with one agenda, but as a cluster of different

entities that are pulling it in separate directions and causing conflicts. In addition to the state's cost-effective and neoliberal actions right before and during the crisis, it has for decades been contributing in the background to the slow collapse of the former industrial city.

As my fieldwork data shows, the residents of Flint are deeply dissatisfied and disappointed with the state's actions, calling especially the emergency management law undemocratic and unjust toward the city with a majority of people being poor and of color. Even though the residents started complaining early on about the water quality, the state officials kept arguing that the water was fine, and the situation would get better. Not listening to the people, denying all possible problems and acting too slowly are some of the things the officials were accused of and which caused the residents to lose trust in the officials and their integrity. All of this led to a questioning of the citizen – state relationship and transformed the ways the residents see themselves as produced by the state, something that I will further elaborate in chapter 4.1.

My thesis contributes to the growing discussion about the role of the state and its governance, proposing a tragic example of what can happen when financial stability is placed above everything else, democratic decision-making disregarded and when the adopted neoliberal governance forms exacerbate local injustice and marginalization. My thesis traces the relationship between the state and its neoliberal managing models and how citizens perceive the state and its actions in their everyday lives. Usually, neoliberalism is associated with privatization and big companies working profit-focused and harming the communities around them. In the case of Flint, however, there was no private company behind the water crisis, but instead a state that placed monetary interests above human safety. In anthropology as well, in the context of environmental and social catastrophes, neoliberalism has mostly been used to explain a certain type of post-disaster reconstruction and "capitalizing" on people's suffering after a crisis. My thesis, on the contrary, strives to explain two

less studied phenomena: state-sanctioned neoliberal policies and their impact in the formation of a crisis, as opposed to the aftermath.

My research brings together the economic and historical aspects of the water crisis, tying them to an ethnographic focus on the personal and community experience of the situation, such as people's vulnerability, resilience and agency. Anthropology as a discipline is well suited for studying the cultural foundations of state formation. Ethnographic fieldwork is a useful tool for looking at state structures from the grassroots, through the anthropological gaze (Bouchard 2011, p. 201). I want to emphasize, though, that I do not study the state as an *institution*, but rather its policies and the people's perceptions of it. To paraphrase Bouchard about the significance of anthropological research on states: *"...it is the on-the-ground research on lived lives in states that provides the richest detail to anthropologists studying states, and has significant potential to develop new theories that will allow the discipline to make its contribution to the study of state-level organization"* (ibid., p. 203).

Being such a recent case, not very much research in social sciences has been done about the Flint crisis. Thus, my thesis is a contribution to that and I hope it can inspire some future anthropologists/social scientists to familiarize themselves with the case. There is some notable anthropological literature about other cities around the world like Flint — economically abandoned and subjected to environmental harm. In the United States, anthropologists began looking at the consequences of deindustrialization in the 1980s[1]. The shutting down of factories and other industrial facilities lead to thousands of workers getting laid off and the American working class more or less collapsed, politically and economically (Ortner 2016, p. 53). In addition to the themes of the state and neoliberalism, there are many other important topics tied to my analysis of the

[1] For instance, Christine J. Walley (2009) has written an impressive depiction of the deindustrialization of the Southwest Chicago in the 1980s. Her autoethnographic piece from a daughter's perspective is about her father who suffers deeply after one of the many steel mills in the area is closed down.

Flint case, of which also water management, human rights and urban catastrophes should be mentioned.

The story of the Flint water crisis is a difficult one to tell (especially in such a short piece of research paper) because of all the complexities surrounding it, the emotional aspects and the fact that the aftermath is far from over. I have tried my very best to refer only to correct facts and numbers, but any possible mistakes are mine and I take the responsibility for them.

The structure of my thesis is the following: In this chapter, I describe my work, data gathering process and some ethical considerations involved and introduce my fieldwork site more in depth: The City of Flint, its tumultuous history from the automobile industry's blooming years to the city's abandonment and deindustrialization. Chapter 2 is my theory chapter, where I discuss the main anthropological theories I will be using to support my analysis in the following chapters. In chapters 3-5 theories of neoliberalism, the role of the state and anthropological study of disasters are interwoven into the analysis where I piece together my ethnographic findings with the aforementioned theoretical concepts. In chapter 3 I delve into the water crisis and provide a brief summary of. I tie the ethnographic description to theoretical discussions about disasters and vulnerability. Chapter 4 focuses on the concept of the state and its role in the formation of the water crisis, through theorizing it as a complex set of processes instead of as a unitary force. My aim is to anthropologically study how people see and experience the state in their lives, as opposed to providing a focus on the state itself, from the inside. As a part of the state, I also consider citizenship and vulnerable subjects as produced by the actions of the state. Chapter 5 takes the state-centered discussion a step further, analyzing the neoliberal practices and austerity policies through which the city of Flint has been governed for decades. Finally, chapter 6 is where I draw together my findings and present answers to my research questions.

1.2 The Vehicle City: History of Flint

In this subchapter, I introduce my fieldwork site and take a brief look at the historical background of the water crisis. I trace the city's history from the early horse-carriage production days to its deindustrialization as I believe it is crucial to situate all disasters in history. Many people in Finland do not even know where Flint is located, yet in America, it is well known for its automobiles, and today, unfortunately, for its high crime and water problems.

When I spoke with the residents in Flint, a great majority of them mentioned the remarkable history of the city as the birthplace of America's automobile industry and the labor union movement. In fact, Saginaw Street, the main street in downtown is known for its landmark: A big, black arch that reads "Flint Vehicle City". However, the great city of carriages and cars is now, according to many, just a shadow of what it was in its heyday. When it comes to the water crisis, it is important to be aware of the city's history and background, and therefore I will here present a short summary of how the Vehicle City has changed throughout the years.

Flint is located in Mid-Michigan, along the Flint River and it is the largest city of Genesee County. Originally Flint was occupied by the indigenous Ojibwe and the whites arrived in the area in the early 19th century. Soon after that, Flint became the home for the manufacturing of horse-drawn carriages. The carriage production paved the way for the developing automobile industry in the early 20th century, the biggest and best-known manufacturer being General Motors (GM), established in 1908. Flint was also known for its labor movement and the famous sit-down strike of 1936-1937 against GM (Clark 2018).

I met George, a middle-aged man in his office one afternoon for a chat. I had got in touch with him after another informant mentioned him to me as a possible person to talk to. George manages a non-profit organization working to support veterans of war, something that he feels strongly about, being a veteran himself. During the crisis, George has helped to distribute water, driving his van around the city with other volunteers, handing out state-supplied water bottles to homebound people. Despite the March sunshine outside, George's face remains serious and he does not crack a smile during the entire interview. He phrased his thoughts about Flint's history this way:

> For Flint being what it is, we're historically one of the greatest cities in the last hundred years. We created the middle class for the country... [sighing] So many things that we've given and presented to the nation as a city, based on our economics, industry. Everyone in the world is driving a car because of Flint, Michigan. I call it the Silicon Valley of the industrial age, because without Flint, you won't have the technology. GM gave us the functionality of the vehicles, the updated technology.

During the 1950s and 60s, Flint was the home to some 200,000 people and its economy boomed: About 77 000 people worked for General Motors in the city area. GM had started producing war equipment during World War II and as even more workforce was needed than before, Flint now suffered from a shortage of employees (Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2017; Clark 2018). GM eventually also constructed homes in the neighborhoods for its workers and at the time, segregation was a standard practice.

Things took a turn in the second half of the 20th century as GM started building its new plants outside of the city borders as well as shutting down already existing plants. In addition, by the early 1980s the auto giant began transferring its jobs abroad, leading to even more closings in Flint. During the deindustrialization, GM cut altogether about 70,000 jobs in the Flint metro area

(Pulido 2016). Several of my informants mentioned the leaving of GM as the starting point for when things started spiraling downwards in the city. There is historical evidence to support that claim. The former city of vehicles has now lost over 50 % of its population since its glory days in the 60s (Pulido 2016, p. 3).

Kay is a local woman in her late 50s, working for the Genesee County on health matters. We meet one day at a local bar/restaurant over lunch and Kay seems to be in a good mood, laughing and talking a lot. Yet she tells me that dealing with the water crisis, even though she has been on the lucky end of people, has taken its toll on her and that she "used to be a lot more trusting and positive". She also compares the pain of the situation to breaking her spine years ago, pointing out that the crisis certainly hurts more. She told me about the collapse of the auto industry as follows:

> This is an unusual community, because it was based around the auto factories. It acted like a magnet for people who weren't very educated. My own father included, he couldn't read or write, so he came to Flint because he could get a pretty high-paying job in a factory. It was nice because it was able to boost the next generation. I had opportunities because of that, I could go to college. Unfortunately, when those auto factories left, you were left with a whole population of folks that didn't have transferable skills. [pausing] So it was more economically devastating than in might have been… if people had more options.

People in Flint seem to generally agree on the importance of GM for the economy, the reputation and history of Flint, and most associate GM leaving with the downward spiraling economy. I discussed the history with Carroll, a lovely, silvery-haired woman in her late sixties, retired and living with her rescued cats quite close to downtown. We met over coffee in a local bookshop/café and she brought me a tin of cookies, made by a friend of hers.

The small gesture made me feel happy, appreciated, and was enough to convince me that these people are one of a kind. Carroll has been a city resident since the 1980s and has a lot to say about the history of Flint. She proposed a slightly different perspective to the relationship between GM and the economy, suggesting that the bad economic conditions preceded the exit of GM from the city, not vice versa. Here I am quoting her:

> And one of the things that a lot of people lament here in Flint is that you know, GM left us and… [pauses] One of the things that a lot of the younger people don't understand is that in 1973 when there was an oil embargo here in the United States, we had 37 percent local unemployment. 37 percent! It's horrific!
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> — —
>
> And it wasn't that the GM left us… there was no economy here. You know, downtown we had the stores, we had refreshments, we had theaters that actually had people in them, you know, watching movies. We had Carlton stationery store which had art supplies as well as stationery, you know… And back in the 60s and 70s people bought beautiful furniture, you know, it was just an entirely different era.
>
> And since so much of our employment was concentrated in the auto industry, and you can't produce a car if nobody has the money to buy a car. So, it wasn't that GM abandoned us, there was no economy to support it. And we never really got back on our feet.

Whether it was the economy that left the city first or the auto manufacturer, since the leaving of GM, Flint has suffered from a variety of problems: poverty, depopulation, white flight, high crime rates and financial crises. All this was culminated during the 2008 global recession. Even more GM jobs were lost, leaving only some 6,500 positions in Flint, as GM declared bankruptcy the

following year (Pulido 2016, p. 3). As of 2017, there were some 96,448 residents in Flint with a devastating 41.9 % of them living below the federal poverty level. About 54.3 % of the residents are of African American descent, 40.4 % are white and the rest belong to other groups of origin (US Census Bureau, accessed 19.06.2018). The constantly declining population has led to disinvestment and even greater abandonment by the state. For example, the number of officers in the police department has been cut drastically, public schools are being shut down and the residents were still during the time of my fieldwork made to pay incredible amounts of money for their (undrinkable) water.

Except for a few spots downtown, everywhere in Flint the marks left by deindustrialization were clearly visible during my stay. Below is an excerpt from my field diary from when I was taken by car on a “sightseeing” tour around different areas in Flint, together with Carroll and her friend Ron. Ron is a tall, black man, some ten years younger than Carroll, with a loud laugh and lots of things to say.

> As we are sitting in the car on a sunny Friday afternoon, Ron and Carroll talk non-stop and point to me different buildings. Houses where their relatives used to live, abandoned schools (and which famous basketball players used to attend them), small shops where people would fight and shoot all the time, notorious streets and the better-off areas with decorated villas, which don’t have any value these days anymore because of the city’s current situation.
>
> We drive for almost an hour and Carroll mentions at every big street whether it divides the city on the north-south or east-west axis. Both Ron and Carroll repeat a fair few times how there used to be houses tightly side by side to each other and how Flint once was the home for some

200 000 people and the greatest industrial city in the U.S., the ultimate dream of so many people.

But as I look out of the window, I am struggling to see the glory of the once great vehicle city. Anywhere I look, I see houses in such devastatingly poor condition that it is almost impossible to imagine anyone living there. Yet, some of the houses look inhabited, with sheets draped over the windows and ragged cars parked on the sidewalk. We drive past some better-off areas as well, but I also see whole neighborhoods of houses almost falling apart: burnt roofs, walls sprayed with graffiti, boards over the windows and huge piles of trash bags on the porches. As I look at the parched grass, I see an unbelievable amount of scrunched plastic bottles and trash glittering in the sunlight, almost looking like small stars trying to shed some light to the tormented city. *(Field notes, 23.03.2018)*

Abandoned houses/photo: Bea Bergholm

1.3 Data, methods and analysis

I arrived in Flint on a February night, after an all-day long snowstorm and an almost 30-hour long travel. I had no contacts to the city whatsoever, and I had never even been overseas before. Therefore, finding interviewees and informants was a step by step process in which I had a lot of help from the people of Flint that I met. Almost everyone I talked to came up with names and phone numbers for people who I could contact if I wanted to. Everyone was genuinely helpful and supportive of my research intentions, even though I feared beforehand that the residents might be skeptic about another outsider, as the water crisis has attracted a lot of attention and unwanted visitors.

During my fieldwork, the issues I faced mostly had to do with the practicalities of living in a foreign city. Transportation was the biggest issue. I did not have a car at my disposal and I was relying on the city buses, Uber and walking as much as I felt safe to. As Flint is a city built around the automobile industry, the bus lines are not very comprehensive and only small parts of the city have paved pathways for pedestrians. Therefore, most of my fieldwork took place in the city center, around the campus of the University of Michigan-Flint. I conducted my interviews primarily in various cafés and public spaces, but I was also a few times invited to my informants' offices around the city.

Ideally, I could have explored the city more if I had had a car and felt safer to do so. The people of the city live fairly dispersed around it and the city center, "downtown", is mostly a place for the economically better-off people. Even though the area has been greatly renovated in the last few years and now features several cozy cafés, an upgraded performing arts theater, The Capitol, and even a new location for the iconic Farmers' Market, there are still for example no big grocery stores within the city limits. Most people take the car to Walmart or Kroger, which are both located in Flint Township, some 6,5 kilometers from the city center.

Even if the environment of my fieldwork was spatially quite limited, I feel like I was able to gain a good, basic understanding of the life in the city by exploring several interesting public places, such as the Sloan Museum, the Flint Institute of Arts, the Public Library and the university campus. In addition to the interviews and participant observation, my study is supported by various informal interactions and chats, which provided me with invaluable background information.

When starting my fieldwork, I was originally interested in focusing on the water crisis as an issue of environmental racism, as it had been framed as such broadly in the U.S. media. While I do recognize that the situation had everything to do with environmental racism, I quite quickly realized that I must have a more open-minded attitude and let people focus on anything about the water crisis they felt was important. Therefore, I kept my interviews quite open-ended and generalized and tried to grasp whatever topic my interviewees brought up as significant. I tried my best not to direct my informants in any ways and give them space to associate freely. Sometimes that lead to us discussing for example Mexican food and psychic reading for a long time, but I only found it enjoyable to discuss something other than water issues for a change — and I hope my interviewees did too.

My main data consisted of 13 semi-structured, recorded interviews, approximately an hour long each. Out of those, one interview included three participants, and another included two interviewees. In addition, I did two shorter and more informal interviews which I took notes of but did not record. I also did daily participant observation, took notes in my field diary and attended two semi-formal meetings discussing the water crisis and one movie screening followed by a discussion. I also took photographs of the city, followed the local news daily and watched documentaries and short films focusing on the city and its issues. After my fieldwork I started transcribing the interviews and systematically

analyzing my data relying mainly on the grounded theory method. Grounded theory allows an understanding of the phenomenon to emerge through analyzing the already collected data, as opposed to first adopting a theoretical framework and then interpreting the phenomenon through it. As I noticed reoccurring themes in my data, I connected it to the discussions of neoliberalism and state politics and then began deepening my knowledge of the said anthropological theories.

My aim was to include people from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds and viewpoints, which I feel that I succeeded in. I interviewed quite evenly both men and women, white and black Flint residents, some born and raised in the city. The age span of my interviewees was also comprehensive, between anything from approximately 30 to 70. Additionally, the life situations and economic and social backgrounds of my interviewees were different: There were for example middle-class academics, low-income retirees and mothers with small children. Following the code of ethics set by the American Anthropological Association (AAA Statement on Ethics 2012), I made sure to always begin my interviews with telling about myself, my project and its intents. I also asked my interviewees if they wanted to appear with their real names in my thesis or with pseudonyms. Even though some people wanted me to conceal their workplace or other background information, no one felt the need for a pseudonym in this case.

1.4 Ethical considerations

My main concern before and during my fieldwork was a dilemma most likely familiar to many researchers living among people facing a crisis and economic and social hardships: Am I exploiting these people for my own advancement? Is there anything I can give back?

Before my trip, I had tried to read as much about the case as possible and I had come across statements that were very critical of any outsiders and researchers coming to Flint. The water crisis has (especially since the federal declaration of emergency in 2016) attracted unwanted attention and people were wary of exploitative researchers and journalists crowding the city. I decided to ask a few of my interviewees about their feelings about the global attention. All my informants told me that any attention that might help the city to get economic and social help is good, but helpers should be aware of where their donations are going. Demitrius, one of my informants, answered my question and pointed out the many international celebrities that have raised money for the city:

> When people donate to the water crisis, the job not getting done. Regardless of how much money they donate to us, it's all about the government and what they gonna do with it. They gonna really get the money and fix the pipes or… As anybody sees, the pipes are not fixed yet and we've had probably over a hundred million dollars altogether when it comes to the funding. I feel like I don't think that celebrities should donate money here, because they not doing what they should for the people.

I realized during my fieldwork that unfortunately there are very few options for a single researcher like me to notably help the city in its recovery efforts. It felt bad, but I tried to remind myself that educating myself is the least I can do and that is exactly what I am doing. I suppose that the residents' warm reaction to me might have had something to do with the fact that they did not consider me as much as an exploiter as they may consider e.g. journalists who get paid for their work in Flint. I made it explicitly clear to my informants that I am conducting research with grant money and my own savings and the only benefit I will get is to be able to graduate. Additionally, I explained to them that the water crisis has not been in the news in Finland as much as it (according to me) should have

been, and that my research is an effort to make it better known, even just for my fellow students and professors[2].

I am extremely grateful to all those people who supported my research during the fieldwork and shared with me their thoughts and experiences. I wish the City of Flint and all its residents nothing but the best in the future.

Downtown Flint with its "Flint Vehicle City" arch/photo: Bea Bergholm

[2] In 2016 after the federal emergency declaration, some Finnish news media, such as YLE, Helsingin Sanomat and MTV featured the Flint crisis, and Ilta-Sanomat and Marmai noted it in 2018, but there has been no follow-up news about the case since then.

2 Theoretical frameworks

In this chapter I briefly introduce the main theoretical approaches I will be using to support my arguments about the Flint water crisis, namely theories of the state and neoliberalism, intrinsically linked together both in theory and practice. After a general overview of these concepts, in the analysis chapters I will situate them more specifically within the framework of the water crisis and its background. My thesis aims to construct a holistic picture of the water crisis as a case of state malfunction, money-driven decision-making and human rights violation.

2.1 State-society division and state processes

"States remain the metaphorical elephant in the anthropological room of the social science household; they are observed peripherally, mentioned in passing, but the subject rarely broached directly. States are sometimes half-heartedly acknowledged, but rarely studied anthropologically as discrete objects of study", argues Bouchard (2011, p. 185-186).

For a long time indeed, anthropology as a discipline lacked a focus on the state as an object of study, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the nature of state was understood as something non-objective, or as Radcliffe-Brown put it in the 1940s, as "a fiction of the philosophers". Secondly, because of anthropological ethnographic methods, the state was thought to be beyond the reach of anthropologists, better suited for political scientists to study (Bouchard 2011). One of the central aims for this thesis is to take up the challenging study of the state and its processes, through a focus on "ordinary people" at the grassroots level in Flint, Michigan. *"A state formation is the result of myriads of situations where social actors negotiate power and meaning. This shifts the focus of analysis to the many practices of power and the mundane and ritual forms that constitute the state"*, argue Krohn-Hansen and Nustad (2005, p. 12). In following

this vein, I examine the everyday practices of the Flint residents as active citizens and how they perceive the state of Michigan as a neoliberal actor. I emphasize that I do not study the state *institution* as an anthropological concept, but rather its policies and the people's perceptions of it. In the analysis chapters of this thesis, I will delve into these perceptions more thoroughly.

Due to its historical origins, anthropology did not for a long time acknowledge the state as a suitable subject for ethnographic research. The expectation was that anthropology was to focus on so-called stateless or primitive societies (Das & Poole 2004, p. 4). French anthropologist Pierre Clastres challenged this ethnocentric view which equates primitive societies with a lack of the state. He claimed that some societies without a state or leadership (sometimes actively against it) are in fact both affluent and complex (Clastres 1989 [1974]). For a long time after Radcliffe-Brown's critical remark, anthropologists pondered on the necessity of studying the state. Radcliffe-Brown insisted on not treating the state as a concrete object and his point has been further elaborated by Abrams (1988) in arguing that instead of an objective entity, there exists an idea of the state and different government institutions. These institutions in turn seem to exist as a unified whole because the state idea makes them appear more coherent and legitimate (Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2005, p. 5). Abrams' emphasis can be seen as approaching Foucault's notion of governmentality, a certain kind of ubiquitous power of the state, manifested in institutions, subjects and knowledge production (ibid., p. 6).

Tracing the history of state-focused studies, Mitchell distinguishes two approaches that have dominated in American social science since the 1950s. The first approach called for a total abandonment of the state, arguing that the term itself was too ideological and that it should instead be replaced with the idea of "political system". However, the new term was too imprecise to establish itself as a valid alternative, so the second response to the difficulty of studying the state was instead to "bring back the state": The research defined the state in

several different ways and saw it as being autonomous from society. Simultaneously, this approach theorized state and society to be separate entities, an understanding that has been criticized and questioned in contemporary anthropology (Mitchell 1999, p. 170, 172).

In theorizing the perceived separation between state and society, the work of Timothy Mitchell greatly helps me. He focuses on the modern techniques of governing that make the state appear as a fixed entity and distinct from society. He questions the state as taken for granted and proposes that we instead examine the practices *"through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced"* (Mitchell 1999, p. 170). According to Mitchell, the state should not be seen as a coherent and autonomous actor, yet the agency associated with the state helps to create the apparent boundary between state and society. This way the state is seen as an autonomous actor intervening in societal life, and statist approaches to studying the state take this view as a reality. Although Mitchell's text is quite old (1999), his thoughts are still echoed in the current theoretical literature of the state. For instance, focusing on the state-society separation, he argues that we need an approach to the state that *"refuses to take for granted this dualism, yet accounts for why social and political reality appears in this binary form"* (Mitchell 1999, p. 176).

I argue that in the case of Flint, the state (that is, the state of Michigan) is and should be seen not as a coherent actor, but as a cluster of different entities that through their daily actions reproduce the dichotomy of state and society. The residents see the state as separate from them, a force made up of mostly privileged people who have very little compassion or willingness to support the city on decline. In Flint the state is seen as consisting of different institutions and actors which all played a role in the unfolding of the crisis. The biggest blame for the situation falls on the state's governor and emergency managers, as will become clear in the analysis chapters. Using expressions like *"they"*, *"the officials"* and *"those in power"*, the people I spoke with made it very clear that

they feel like the state and the emergency managers acted as an outside force and overruled the complaints from the locals.

Also writing about the relationship between state and society, Ferguson and Gupta examine the verticality and encompassment of states in their influential piece *"Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality"* (2002). According to them, the aforementioned two concepts are often emphasized in academic discourses on the state. Verticality is defined as the idea of the state being "above" civil society, and in that case all planning happens top down. Encompassment again refers to the idea of the state being located within a *"series of circles that begins with family and local community and ends with a system of nation-states"* (Ferguson & Gupta 2002, p. 982). State-society relations have been popular in discussions of the state especially in political sciences and the opposition between state and society brings with it an idea of vertical encompassment, the state being above society (ibid.).

Contemporary anthropological approaches to the state draw our attention to practices and processes rather than fixed institutions. Krohn-Hansen and Nustad explain this argument well in saying that states are constructed as the result of complex sets of practices and processes and formed in countless situations where different social actors and power relationships work. So, instead of seeing and analyzing institutions perceived as the state, we should focus on everyday practices of power (Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2005, p. 12). This is exactly what I am striving to do in my thesis, focusing on how the residents of Flint see the state through its mundane practices during the water crisis and how they react to these actions. Chapter 4 is where I elaborate this more in depth.

Trouillot calls for a very similar approach as Krohn-Hansen and Nustad, in stating that the state is not an apparatus, but rather a set of processes. Even though it is seen to be linked to systems that sometimes are governmental, the

state is still not necessarily bound by a certain institution nor is it fixed to a particular place. Trouillot continues: *"At that level, its materiality resides much less in institutions than in the reworking of processes and relations of power so as to create new spaces for the deployment of power"* (Trouillot 2001, p. 127). For Trouillot, seeing the state as a set of practices means that the analytical task is to identify what these state-effects are and how and where they are produced (ibid.).

Krohn-Hansen and Nustad point out a few prominent difficulties in the anthropological study of the state. One of them is that anthropologists have found it challenging to conceptually grasp "the state" and therefore the idea of the state has been flexible and contested, its usage even incoherent. According to the authors, all this calls for more detailed and critical explorations of the state and its social formations, studied through the lens of ethnography (Krohn-Hansen & nustad 2005, p. 5). The critique toward anthropological inquiries of the state echoes some of the same themes as critique toward the concept of neoliberalism: Not enough focus on it and ultimately seeing is as too predominant, taken for granted. Several scholars (see e.g. Joseph & Nugent 1994, Mitchell 1999 and Trouillot 2001) have criticized the assumption of the state as an *a priori* concept, *"a distinct, fixed and unitary entity that defines the terrain in which other institutions function"* (Sharma & Gupta 2006, p. 9). This has led to an updated approach to the state, focusing on its ideological and material aspects that differentiate it from other institutional forms and the power relations derived from it.

2.2 Anthropological approaches to neoliberalism

The word "neoliberalism" has increasingly attracted anthropologists and exploded in popularity since the millennium. Despite its popularity, the term itself does not have one single definition which all social scientists would agree on. Most discussions, however, associate neoliberalism with the historical

conjuncture of the 1970s and 1980s. A period which was characterized by the oil crisis, fiscal hardships and a crisis of the welfare system, to name a few. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner has called anthropological studies about neoliberalism "dark anthropology": *"...that is, anthropology that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them"* (Ortner 2016, p. 49).

Schwegler writes about the trickiness of defining the term, especially after scholars have refused to distinguish all its multiple meanings. Precisely because neoliberalism is such an ambiguous term, I want to make it clear to the reader in which meaning I use the term in my thesis. Schwegler makes a distinction between two modes of neoliberalism, and I believe my theorization of the term falls somewhere in the middle:

> Narrowly defined, neoliberalism is used to describe specific policies "marked by a shift from Keynesian welfarism towards a political agenda favouring the relatively unfettered operation of markets" (Larner 2000 in Schwegler). More broadly, neoliberalism denotes a rationality of governance that "involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action" (Brown 2003 in Schwegler). Whereas the former definition confines the discussion of neoliberalism to specific policies, the latter identifies neoliberalism as an all-encompassing social, moral, and political faith (Schwegler 2008, p. 682).

Also, James Ferguson notes the big variation in how the word neoliberalism is used in contemporary social sciences. In the strict sense, it refers to a macroeconomic doctrine which includes promoting a free, private market and reducing the state. Another way of conceiving neoliberalism is seeing it as a regime of practice, different from the doctrine itself yet associated with it. Understood this way, neoliberalism is a set of public policies that strive to enrich the holders of capital, while simultaneously leading to reduced public services,

increasing inequality and generally worsened life conditions for the poor and working classes (Ferguson 2009, p. 170).

Although neoliberalism is most commonly understood as reducing the state in favor of a strong private market, the Flint case brings forth another perspective to this view. As there was no company or privatization immediately behind the water switch, the case can be seen as an example of a state adopting neoliberal policies in order to alleviate an economically struggling city. What became clear to me was that the locals thought that the state governed the city as if it was a business, focusing on cutting costs in any possible ways. I argue that this business-minded way of running the city was wrong and unjust in the Flint residents' opinion and led them to lose their trust in the state. I will explain this point further in my thesis.

Back to the definitions of neoliberalism, David Harvey, known for his studies on neoliberalism, defines the term as follows:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey 2005, p. 2).

He further argues that neoliberalism values market exchange as *"an ethic in itself"* and neoliberal thought seeks to *"bring all human action into the domain of the market"*, as the belief is that social wellbeing will be maximized when the scope of market transactions is maximized as well (Harvey 2005).

According to Harvey, the first neoliberal experiment in state formation can be traced back to Chile in 1973 and a coup against the democratically elected leftist government which eventually also led to the freeing of markets. A group of U.S. economists ("the Chicago boys") helped to reconstruct the Chilean economy along the lines of free market, privatization and facilitation of foreign investment. This led the way for the U.S. president Ronald Reagan and the U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to eventually opt for more neoliberal policies in the 80s (Harvey 2005, p. 8-9). These two leaders are often framed as the poster children of the rise of neoliberal policies which were adopted in order to increase profitability through downsizing, offshoring, shutting down production facilities and laying people off. At the same time the state functions were shrunk, and social support programs cut, resulting in people losing whatever resources they had before (Ortner 2016, p. 53).[3]

I believe one cannot write about neoliberalism without mentioning Michel Foucault and his lectures at the Collège de France in the late 1970s. These lectures were named *"The Birth of Biopolitics"*, yet they focused mostly on neoliberalism and can be attributed to the "return of the state" as an analytical concept. Foucault examined the most significant forms of neoliberalism, that is, the theoretical schools of German ordoliberalism, the Austrian school influenced by Hayek, and American neoliberalism, with a focus on the Chicago school. Foucault also introduced the term "governmentality". He saw the government of the state as the exercise of political sovereignty over a certain territory with its population. He saw a distinction between two modes of government: government of the state and government of the self (Foucault 2008).

This governmentality-focused perspective, strongly associated with Foucault, focuses on the neoliberal shift in governmentality, where the operations of government are economized, and an emphasis put on an

[3] I have intentionally kept the introduction of neoliberalism short in this thesis. For a more detailed explanation on the birth of neoliberalism I would suggest anthropologist David Graeber's article "Neoliberalism, or: The Bureaucratization of the World" (2009)

entrepreneurial model of individual and community responsibility. Another theorization, discussed by anthropologist Aihwa Ong, views neoliberalism as *"a malleable technology of government",* that produces new forms of citizenship (Kingfisher & Maskovsky 2008, p. 118-119, see Ong 2006).

Anthropological neoliberal studies have been criticized (even within the discipline) for viewing neoliberalism as an all-encompassing force from the outside and for not theorizing the term sufficiently. Tejaswini Ganti asks if there is any utility left for neoliberalism as an analytical category, if it is being used to explain almost every phenomenon in our contemporary world. He also raises the question of why anthropologists have chosen the term neoliberalism to describe the contemporary world? Why are they not using "late capitalism" instead? And how do these two terms differ from each other? (Ganti 2014).

According to Ganti, a significant difference between the concepts of late capitalism and neoliberalism is that the former is a fairly neutral term, whereas the latter is theoretically charged and commonly used in critical remarks of capitalist political structures, modes of governance and the role of the state (Ganti 2014). Mathieu Hilgers argues that the word has largely been applied to mean a radicalized form of capitalism that is based on deregulation and restricting state intervention, as well as an emphasis on individual responsibility (Hilgers 2011, p. 352). James Ferguson holds a different view toward the relationship between the two terms, arguing that the word neoliberalism has been used as *"a sloppy synonym for capitalism itself"*, something that is used in current anthropological literature as a *"kind of abstract causal force that comes in from outside"*, creating inequality (Ferguson 2009, p. 171).

In general, very little attention has been paid to specifying what the term means in anthropological theory. Hoffman, DeHart and Collier are calling for a focus on the definition itself: *"...Although ever more anthropological studies are concerned with neoliberalism, there have been few steps made toward an*

anthropology of neoliberalism, that is, an anthropology in which the very definition of neoliberalism is put in question and made an object of investigation" (Hoffman, DeHart & Collier 2006, p. 9).

In addition to questioning the term itself, anthropological neoliberal studies have been criticized for not paying enough attention to neoliberalism's variations but instead seeing it as a something solid and uncontested. Kingfisher and Maskovsky stress the need to move beyond the view of neoliberalism as a unitary structural force and focus instead of the process of it, its *"contradictions, fractures, partialities, contingencies"* and the social forces affecting it (Kingfisher & Maskovsky 2008, p. 119).

Criticism directed towards theories of neoliberalism has also noted how neoliberalism should always be put into context, geographical and historical, as it manifests itself very differently depending on where in the world one is. As Hilgers reminds us:

> Whereas some authors present neoliberalism as the decay of an inflexible state or as the inexorable advance of its right hand, it appears that neoliberal impact can never be understood in radical separation from historical configurations and has to be evaluated differently depending on context (Hilgers 2012, p. 81).

3 The Flint water crisis

The Flint Water Crisis, which began in April 2014 and is still going through its aftermath, is a tragic example of a state's neoliberal policies, environmental injustice and mismanagement. The effects of the crisis, such as public health problems, financial instability and lack of trust in the state, will still be seen for decades to come. In this chapter I situate this water crisis in the context of disaster anthropology, arguing for an extension of anthropological studies on disasters and catastrophes — an extension that would include man-made crises in the discussion, as opposed to only focusing on natural disasters. Man-made and natural disasters share many aspects in common, such as their historicity, their transformative power and the possibility to reveal hidden power structures. This chapter answers such questions as: Why do the residents believe the water crisis was a deliberate poisoning? How does the city's history play into it? What does the water crisis reveal about the society's power structures if considered as a disaster?

In the first subchapter, I aspire to provide an approximately chronological summary of the many causes and events that contributed to the crisis. This chapter with its ethnographic description of the everyday struggles of Flint residents also contextualizes the following discussion of citizenship and vulnerability and their connection to the practices of the state.

3.1 "Don't drink it!": Water crisis timeline

In April 2014, Flint had been depending on Detroit's system as their water source for nearly 50 years with a mutual contract between The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, DWSD[4] (owned by the city) and the city of Flint. The DWSD drew its water from Lake Huron, one of the five Great Lakes on the

[4] DWSD was restructured in 2014 after Detroit's bankruptcy and it merged with several other counties in Michigan to form an independent regional water authority called Great Lakes Water Authority, GLWA.

border of the U.S. and Canada. However, the officials claimed that water from Detroit was becoming overly expensive. The residents of Flint had for a long time complained about their water bill rates, which were among the highest in the entire country, even though some 42 % of the city residents lived under the federal poverty level (Clark 2018, p. 15).

Consequently, according to the officials, the cost of building an own pipeline would be more economical for the city than staying on the Detroit system. They started planning a new pipeline system, called Karegnondi Water Authority, KWA. Predicting other cities to join the new water service as well, the officials championed it as a possible source of income for Flint. However, the new system had not even been built yet and it would take a few years for it to be completed. Until that, the city's emergency manager made the decision to use the Flint River as a temporary source. On April 25th in 2014, Flint's Mayor of that time, Dayne Walling, turned the switch to end the water distribution from Detroit and switch it to the local river. A few days from that, water from the Flint River started flowing through the city's old water plant and into the residents' homes (Adams 2014; Michigan Radio 2015).

Flint's own treatment plant on Dort Highway had sat idle since the city began its contract with the DWSD decades ago. It remained as a backup resource for water emergencies and in 2014 it was thus put to use again as the temporary switch to the Flint River took place. However, Flint's utilities administrator warned the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) about using the water plant, saying that it would take a much longer time than anticipated to upgrade it and train needed staff (Clark 2018, p. 17). Still, other officials gave their approval for the water plant and the switch was made. The local media noted the new water source as well, and for example the Flint Journal headline read: *"Switch to Flint River Water Represents a New Era in Flint"* (Clark 2018, p. 18). Sadly enough, it was not the kind of new era everyone was hoping for.

Soon after the switch to the river was done, Flint residents started noticing odd color, smell and taste in their household water and complained about it. In

response, the officials assured people that the water was safe and drinkable. In August, the water tested positive for E.coli bacteria and the city advised the residents to boil their water before using it. A few months later, the General Motors plant in Flint announced that they would stop using the water, as the chlorine added to the water was corroding their engine parts (CNN 2014; Michigan Radio 2015).

The news about the big automobile company switching to another water source triggered alarm in the city residents. Even after GM left the water system, the officials continued publicly assuring people that the water was fine to drink and wash with.

I spoke to Heather, a local professor and researcher herself and she phrased her thoughts this way:

> One thing that a number of us have commented on, that's still, I find it really fascinating, is that we learned really early on that GM had decided to stop using the Flint water because it was corroding the cars that they were building.
>
> And we, a bunch of professors, highly educated, well-informed people, our response was "Huh? Wow." That was the response that we had. We all look back on that now and think "What, why the disconnect, why didn't we just absolutely freak out and make some kinds of demands on our representative…" Like, why didn't we just do something! We all just went "Huh? Woow."
>
> I'm still really fascinated by that. I think we, the privileged we, must still have some… [pauses] faith in our elected officials and in the structures of our government…who we believe, or did, are mostly there for the good…Right? You know, like they wouldn't be telling us that it was okay to drink this water if it's not.

In early 2015, The MDEQ found high levels of total trihalomethanes (TTHM) in the Flint water. TTHM is a byproduct of water treatment and is associated with possible health problems, such as damage to the nervous system and increased risk of cancer. Even after that, the Mayor confirmed in a press conference that the water was safe. Despite pressure from the residents, the emergency manager refused to allow a switch back to the Detroit system, saying it would cost the city excessively (Smith 2015).

In February 2015 some of the first tests in Flint residents' homes were conducted and thy showed unacceptably high levels of lead. Later that year, researchers from Virginia Tech University conducted tests in over 300 homes and verified the excessively high levels. A Flint-based pediatrician published her research, stating that the lead levels in children had gone up since the water switch and that lead, being a neurotoxin, affects young children in several harmful ways. Her work was, however, repeatedly discredited by state officials before finally taken seriously (Smith 2015).

In addition to TTHM and lead, the water switch caused a local hospital in Flint to report a peak in cases of Legionnaires' disease, a pneumonia-like infection caused by contaminated water (CNN 2014). Then, in October 2015 the Michigan Governor Rick Snyder announced that the city would after a lot of pressure from the public switch back to Detroit water system, which they indeed did. However, the damage to the pipes was already done and the officials said that they did not know how long it would take for the lead levels to normalize again (Michigan Radio 2015; Smith 2015).

In December of 2015, the City of Flint declared a state of emergency, soon followed by Genesee County, state of Michigan and federal emergency declarations (Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2017).

Due to the city's old lead pipes, the water from the highly corrosive Flint River should have been treated with anti-corrosion chemicals before using it. The water in the river is corrosive due to the high chloride levels in it. Chlorides normally do not cause issues in drinking water, but in large amounts they may

break down the metals in water lines. In northern latitudes, such as Michigan, water bodies are susceptible to chloride because of the road salt (sodium chloride) that has been used on roads for decades (Clark 2018, p. 34). Treating the water first, according to several sources, would have cost the state significantly less than dealing with the several unfolding effects of the water crisis. However, corrosion control was not used as the MDEQ had stated that it was not necessary. In addition, the water from the river was naturally more corrosive and more difficult to treat (especially for the insufficiently upgraded Flint water plant) than the water from Lake Huron (Clark 2018, p. 33). Corrosive water causes old pipes to rust and leak and the lack of corrosion control was therefore the technical reason for why the city's water became lead tainted.

Altogether, about 100,000 people were exposed to high levels of lead and at least twelve people have thus far died of Legionnaire's disease[5]. Carroll told me during our interview that her partner died from diagnosed pneumonia, but that she herself suspects that he actually was one of the undocumented victims of Legionnaire's. Another woman I talked with said that during the water crisis she suffered from what the doctors told her was "a virus" and that they refused to specify it, but according to her, the symptoms matched those of Legionnaire's. Lead in turn is a cumulative neurotoxin, which means that once absorbed into the body, it is stored in bones and teeth where it accumulates over time. Being exposed to lead is likely to cause lifelong detrimental health effects, as there is no known safe level of exposure.

Since my fieldwork I have been following the situation in Flint and at the time of writing this, in summer of 2019, the prosecutors announced that they will drop all charges against local and state officials involved in the case and start from scratch in order to expand the scope of the investigation. This understandably infuriated many residents (Davis 2019). At the beginning of the year, as a response to the crisis, the new Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed an

[5] Legionnaire's disease is a pneumonia-like bacterial lung infection that people might get if they breathe in mist/small droplets containing the bacteria. Legionella bacteria can be found in different water systems, such as hot tubs, fountains and rivers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed 25.03.2019).

executive directive which requires state employees to immediately report any threat to public health or safety (Egan 2019). Recent water sample tests in Flint show that the lead levels are within state and federal quality standards, at least in most parts of the city. The construction work for replacing the lead service lines is still going on and it is expected to be completed by the end of 2019, yet people are skeptical about whether replacing the lines will be enough.

3.2 Living with lead

The mundane problems that people of Flint faced (and are still facing today) have been widely written about in the media. Everything from health issues caused by lead and the chemicals in the water, to how difficult it is to take care of personal hygiene with no safe tap water available. Below I have gathered a few snippets from interviews I did, in which people tell me about their everyday practical struggles with bottled water.

I was talking to Kirsten, a woman working in a local grocery store and she told me the following about her first experiences with the water issue:

> Bea: So, when did you first notice the odd color and smell of the water?
>
> Kirsten: Almost four years ago, it was like in May or June. So, then I started posting pictures and telling people about it on Facebook and then somebody from one of the clean water groups contacted me. See, the city of Flint had been telling us the water was safe to drink. And this lady contacted me and asked me if I wanted to have my water tested by somebody besides the city of Flint. So, of course I said yeah.
>
> — — So, finally my husband quit drinking the water because I had been telling him ‘Don’t drink it, I don’t know what it is but there’s something with the water.’ And they hadn’t even tested it for most of the other stuff. You know, this was just lead.
>
> Bea: Did you or your husband experience any health issues?

> Kirsten: Well, my hair was like down to my legs and it started getting really crunchy and falling out, so I would warm up bottled water and started rinsing with that. But it would take me like six water bottles to wash my hair! Just to wash my hair! You know, so I cut it all off.
>
> — — They kept sending us messages, like the boil water advisories. We were boiling our water and we had no idea there was a lead issue. I just knew it was an issue, I didn't know what it was. And then there was like a metallic, sewage-y smell coming from the water.

As it becomes clear in Kirsten's comments, many of the residents had a "gut feeling" of something not being right with the water for a long time before they got a confirmation of it from the state.

Rebecca is a mother of a little child and her family recently moved out to the suburbs, yet she is still working inside the city limits and owns a house in Flint (which, like many other houses, has no value anymore because of the crisis). Her experience with the water crisis has not been as personal as for many others but working with the locals she has heard many stories about the everyday struggles. Rebecca herself had to get her son tested for lead when he was only five months old. She described the experience as very hard, despite the fact that her son's test came out normal. She then went on telling me about the issues the locals are facing:

> Then just in the schools, you can't drink out of the fountain, so they got bottled water. And teachers said like "You wouldn't believe the crinkling of the bottles!" There's nothing you can do about it, because they need to be able to drink their water." From the mundane crinkling up to not being able to give your kid a bath…Without having ten bottles of water…

Rebecca also noted how the bad reputation of the former automobile city seems to persist, even get worse because of the water issue, and how it seems like it is the dominant discourse of everything Flint-related:

> Now, when you travel anywhere, and you tell people you're from Flint, you get that "Owww!" [Rebecca makes a sad face]. But then it also opens up an opportunity to talk to people about what happened. Sometimes it just gets really tiring to talk about that, like you know, we do have other things! [laughs]

Also, Dewaun, a local entrepreneur and a father of two himself, noted the same thing and summarized it quite simply: *"I've traveled the world and the first thing they say is about the water."* When we met with Dewaun, he had just got back from Puerto Rico, which was hit by Hurricane Maria in fall of 2017 and is still struggling.

Besides the water crisis, Flint is also known for not being a particularly peaceful place. The city has been during the 21st century repeatedly considered as one of the most dangerous cities in the country. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, statistics of 2017 show that Flint was the sixth most violent city in America, of cities with a population of at least 50 000 (Adams 2018). Despite the prevalent discourse about the Vehicle City, there are many people affected by the water crisis who are trying to survive and persist the best they can.

Shayne is a father to small children and he is one of the many locals who are trying to stay active and positive, help their neighbors and other people with the everyday tasks of the uncommon ways of using and not using water. We met at a local café and he told me he is one of the lucky people because for him it is fairly easy to go and pick up the weekly water bottles. For water distribution, the city residents were, at the time of my fieldwork, relying on state-maintained points-of-delivery ("PODs" as they are called), which were open at certain hours and would give everyone with a Flint address free cases of water bottles.

I visited one of the PODs with Carroll and was surprised by how effortless it was — if you have a car at your disposal, that is. We basically just sat in the car, one employee came to ask Carroll for her address and then they loaded the bottles into the backseat. It was all done within a few minutes and afterward we drove to Carroll's house, where I helped her carry the bottles onto her porch. The

residents who do not have a car or are homebound for any reason, have the possibility to call a service number and get the water delivered home. However, I did hear from quite a few people that the delivery service was not working as well as it should have. Just a few days after I left Flint in April 2018, the water distribution sites were permanently closed, despite objections from the residents.

> I have a couple of minivans, so it's easy [getting water]. But then walking it [the cases of bottles] up and down the stairs, using it, recycling it, it's definitely been a different experience. We had to move our toothbrushes out of the bathroom because it's like a reflex, you just grab it and go, and I don't want the kids to do it, says Shayne.

He also told me very openly and honestly about all the negative feelings he has as he is trying to take care of his kids in the best possible way under the given circumstances:

> I've had to be proactive as a parent, making sure they have fluoride in their water and all these things. It's not just the bottled water, we have to be careful. That's the hardest part, being a parent. And the fear, you know I'm scared to death that because of where I chose to live, is going to affect their entire future. It sucks.

Listening to Shayne made me feel deeply saddened. He is afraid of unintentionally harming his children's health because he once moved to Flint and never anticipated something like the water crisis happening. From speaking with him I understood that he feels vulnerable as he has been subjected to something he or his family did not want or deserve. Despite his difficult situation, he still tries to live his life and be an active member of the community, and he tells me for example about his political aspirations. In chapter 4 I discuss vulnerability caused by the state and the relations between the state and Flint citizens. I can only imagine that Shayne's feelings reflect those of so many others living in the city. Dewaun has similar experiences with his kids and the

challenging task of having to tell them what is going on in order to keep them safe. Here I am quoting him at length:

> I have two children myself [at the time of the interview seven and nine years]. First time I took them to lead testing, it was just a real shock, right. My daughter would just cry, and I was just so pissed off. These kids have no idea what's going on, very innocent, they been subjected to this and I had to be the one to break it to them and tell what the deal is. I watched them wash with bottled water and they looked at me like "What's going on with the water?" And that's a real conversation that has to be had.
>
> I talked to them, we boil our water before we bathe and of course we have a full-house filtration system. I told them why we have this. Really want them to know that this is what we went through at this point of time, see it all, what it is.

Dewaun tells me that the mother of the children lives in another city in Michigan and the kids are used to living in two homes with two very different ways of using water: *"They know like 'When we go to dad's house we gotta boil the water, we gotta get bottled water to brush our teeth, we can't drink the water, we can't put in on our face, when we bathe it's in and out', you know what I'm saying."*

The above presented experiences of my informants help to construct an idea of what the everyday state-citizen interaction looks like in Flint. Having to go to state-maintained PODs, getting told the water is fine although it looks and smells odd, letting the GM plant switch water sources but not the city residents… The examples are many. In the following chapters I will explain how these mundane examples affect how the residents perceive the state as an actor. The people I met were divided about their confidence in the future of Flint: Some thought that the city will be able to rise back to its feet thanks to the efforts by the residents, whereas others, especially the people who were hit the hardest, expressed very dark visions about the future. Only time will tell how things turn out, but the aftermath of the crisis is still far from over.

3.3 Water crisis as a disaster

"Nothing that has been uncovered to date suggests that anyone intended to poison the people of Flint. Nor is there presently any evidence that anybody considered elevated lead levels to be acceptable because Flint is a city primarily made up of people of color." This conclusion is suggested by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission Report on the water crisis in February 2017. The question of whether the lead poisoning of Flint was intentional or not, has been under debate since the crisis' beginning.

In this subchapter I will answer the question of why the locals think the water crisis might have been an intentional act from the state, a poisoning of the city. Their answers strongly focus on the theme of injustice, connected to the place they are living in, their skin color and their economic status. I propose a perspective to the Flint crisis that combines anthropological disaster studies with the fact that the water crisis was deliberately man-made, as opposed to a natural disaster striking out of nowhere.

The lead crisis has been framed alternately in the media as either a contamination or as a deliberate poisoning of Flint residents. This dichotomy became clear during my fieldwork as well. Some people believed that the state officials did not anticipate the magnitude of the consequences, but most of the people I spoke with felt that the role of the state officials was more active than just misunderstanding and forgetting. A few were downright confident that the officials tried to deliberately poison the 100 000 city residents. I want to stress here that I do not wish to take a personal stance on this in my thesis, but rather just reiterate the thoughts of my informants and what has been written about the case in the media.

For example, Tru, a Flint born and raised woman with a loud voice and strong opinions, believed that the water crisis was *"a set-up"*, something that was planned and purposely done to the residents. Robert, a man in his sixties, compared the water crisis to some racist events in the past, like the police shooting the young, black man Michael Brown in 2014, or experiments like Tuskegee, a syphilis-study conducted on African American men. The experiment, which started in the 1930s, eventually lead to severe health problems and even deaths for some 400 men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed 5.2.2019).

We discussed Flint's bad reputation with Tru and her friend Beth at a local café/book shop. I asked Tru why she believes that Flint was chosen as the target of a set-up poisoning of this kind. She answered me as follows:

> Flint has always been a poor city. Shops were pulled out, I believe what's going on now was started back then. They caused Flint to be poor. More of a black population. These years of talking Flint being number one murder cap, I believe that caused people to say "Well, they just a bunch of murderers and prostitutes, who cares". Flint was not number one murder cap! [raising her voice] We did not have as many murders as they said. That was just to cause people to turn their head from Flint, to prepare for what they were going to do.

What is apparent in Tru's comment is the strong belief in that the officials and decision-makers undervalued Flint as a city because of its demographics (poor and black) and reputation (murder capital). According to Tru, "they" also deliberately framed Flint as a murderous place in order to make it look bad and worthless, thus justifying what was done about the water.

I wanted to know more about what people think about the possible racial aspects behind the crisis, so I contacted a local positive news media, Unity News. Unity consists of three men, all people of color, and after a few messages

on Facebook I was invited to their office in the northern part of the city. They seemed impressed with my task to come all the way from Finland to try to understand the water crisis, and they even asked me if *they* could record my interview with them and show it on their social media platforms. A little bit nervous, but delighted, I agreed.

We all sat down for a chat and I asked them about their experiences with the crisis and environmental racism associated with it. Cameron, dressed in a grey hoodie and glasses, brought up something that had been repeatedly stated both by my informants and by the media, namely that other cities in Michigan, white and better-off cities, do not and most likely will not ever have similar problems. Cameron thought that race played a part in the decisions made and continued by saying that: *"I can kinda say they would intentionally do it, because we know not to use the water, GM was here, so it was a lot of toxic waste in the water in the first place. I feel like that was kinda for them to save money and cut costs, it was like we wasn't a priority. That's how I feel about it."* Jermaine, holding a video camera a few meters from us, nodded his head in agreement and named Grand Blanc and Battle Creek as examples of Michigan cities (both over 70 % white) that would not have been subjected to a similar kind of action.

Social scientist Laura Pulido is one of those researchers who believe that the city was poisoned on purpose. According to her, as the economic capital abandoned Flint a long time ago, it became an increasingly poor place with a black majority. This in turn justified the state to abandon it as well, something that came to be seen as shrinking investment in services and infrastructure and decreasing democratic practice. In her paper she uses the word "poisoning" deliberately, as she believes that words like "contamination" erase agency and consciousness, whereas poisoning suggests a deliberate and evil act. Like my informant Robert, Pulido compares the situation to other assaults on people of color. She mentions Tuskegee, as well as uranium mining on Navajo land, and the sterilization of Latina women in the 1960-70s (Pulido 2016, p. 2).

Heather's opinion, I believe, is strongly influenced by her academic background in the social sciences. *"I actually hate calling it a water crisis, I don't think it's a water crisis"*, she said. *"It's a crisis of democracy, of racism and classism. It's a crisis of access to clean water."* She agreed with me when I said that I have heard some people call it a humanitarian crisis and she believed that the situation was not an accident, but a purpose fall. Heather's remark about *what kind of crisis* the situation should be called, brings up an important point: The words and discourse used can frame the case very differently. I quote the MCRC's report again:

> The Civil Rights Commission will continue to use the word crisis to define the events in Flint. While the definition may not be exactly correct, the term has the benefit of having become a commonly used and recognized way of referencing the harm that befell the people of Flint. More important, when disasters and declared states of disaster occur, they are cleaned up and declared over. Declaring an end to a disaster may be appropriate for events that result from outside forces, though many of the people affected may still be dealing with the "disaster" for some time thereafter. Government, however, caused this crisis and therefore government should not see this as a disaster that can be followed by a short period of recovery and then ended (Michigan Civil Rights Commission 2017).

Disasters are defined in anthropology as processes that combine a destructive agent from the natural or built environment with a population in a socially or economically vulnerable condition. The result is a disruption to the everyday life and individual and social needs for survival. Disasters do not happen in a vacuum, but they are always multidimensional, historical processes which involve multiple subjectivities (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 2002, p. 4).

"Coherence and contradiction, cooperation and conflict, hegemony and resistance, as they are expressed through the operation of physical, biological, and social systems and behavioral practices, become manifest" in disasters as they challenge the society holistically (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 2002, p. 7). Disasters also disclose linkages and relations between the local community and the larger structures, such as the state and nation. How these relationships work is manifested in stressful conditions in ways that are not evident under normal conditions in everyday life. According to Hoffman and Oliver-Smith, the actions and performance of certain state-level organizations can trigger a change in the relations of communities and the larger society (ibid. p. 10).

In many cases modern disasters are indicators of institutions failing to live up to their expectations and missions (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 2002). *"…The increase in technological disasters, and in particular those with lasting toxic impact, has an undeniable human agency and is seen by some to endanger faith in human institutions, placing doubt or calling into question the validity of culture itself"* (ibid. p. 46). All of the descriptions above are applicable to the Flint crisis in a very straightforward manner. The water crisis might at first seem as something happening out of nowhere, but as my thesis strives to demonstrate, there were indeed decades of economical abandonment and state mismanagement behind the lead poisoning. The water disaster brought forth the power structures between the local residents and the state, causing the locals to feel worthless and undeserving of protection. Like my informants' comments demonstrate, the assumption was that the state's job is to protect its citizens, but as the details of the crisis were revealed, the people lost trust in protection from the state.

One of the reasons for looking at the Flint water crisis from a disaster perspective is because anthropological disaster research emphasizes how disasters are always grounded in history. Like Roberto Barrios puts it: *"Anthropological definitions of disaster, in contrast, understand catastrophes as*

the end result of historical processes by which human practices enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacities of geophysical phenomena, technological malfunctions, and communicable diseases and inequitably distribute disaster risk according to lines of gender, race, class, and ethnicity" (Barrios 2017, p. 151).

Anthropologist Peter Little writes about technological disaster in Endicott, a small town in western New York, the birthplace of the technological giant IBM. Endicott residents have for decades lived with high-tech pollution from the plant and witnessed a chemical spill from the plant in 1979 which contained a soup of different chemicals. The town is now going through one of the country's largest mitigation efforts (Little 2014). Just like Flint, Endicott is seen by the residents as a place where it all once started (high-tech in Endicott, automobile industry in Flint), and a place that is today poor and deindustrialized, another troubled Rust Belt city.

The similarities between the comments of Endicott and Flint residents are striking. Many of the residents Little spoke with let him know that the TCE contamination is *"just another sign"* of the town falling apart and becoming one of the many cities that are left decaying after a long period of industrial dynamism (Little 2014, p. 63). These views as well as the feeling of an overall decline in the quality of life, both echo the same themes and feelings as the people in Flint have. Endicott residents shared similar concerns over their health and the toxins affecting it, not knowing for sure where the many cancers and other illnesses were coming from and hearing conflicting information from public health officials. Also, their views of the working of the state and its officials could almost be from my own fieldwork.

A quote from one of Little's informants, "Larry", sums it up quite well: *"I think the state probably didn't really pay close attention to us for a long time. I mean, if it had happened in a nicer place, they might have done more to clean it up early*

on. But they sat on the whole problem for 25 years, maybe with the effect that people would not give too much voice to it. The community found their voice" (Little 2014, p. 163).

In the case of Flint, the neglect of the city's infrastructure and the misuse of corrosion control ultimately led to the large-scale poisoning. But as I have strived to make clear throughout my thesis, the roots of the situation can be traced decades back in history. During my fieldwork, everyone I spoke with brought up the rich history of Flint (which I have explained more in detail in chapter 1.2), in one way or another. People often referred to the city as the historic middle-class automobile town, the industrial heart of the Midwest, if not the whole United States.

As I have argued above, the situation in Flint should be considered as a culmination of the long history of deliberate mismanagement and abandonment, not just as a one-time accident. Although the source of the lead poisoning was a natural element, water, the crisis cannot be seen as natural, but historically man-made. Therefore, I propose that the anthropology of disasters should focus more on man-made catastrophes and their connections to the local history and population.

The issue with the Flint crisis, whether we call it a crisis, a disaster, a catastrophe or something else, is that it is still not over and will not be over in a long time in the future. Even if all the pipes were changed and the water proved to be completely safe, the people still remember the loss of trust and feelings of injustice. I was talking with George about this, how different crises are quickly forgotten about as the society's memory span seems to be very short. George criticized the fact that the state officials did not act appropriately, but instead dismissed the problems they had caused:

> When this water situation is done, what happens to the people? ‘Oh, everything’s perfect!’ No, it’s not, your thought process just goes to something else. Shootings, hurricanes in Puerto Rico…
>
> Those things are travesties, but most of those are natural disasters, or controllable through actions of congress. Gun control, you can make a decision and change the effect almost immediately. A fire, you can only do what you can do. But when you have something, like, okay, I purposely put a bug on your shirt to make you go crazy, then you have to figure out how do we change this, not just ‘Okay, she’s just hysterical’, but why is he putting the bug on her to make her hysterical. And why aren’t ya’ll concerned enough to help her?

After what I think is a good metaphor for describing the situation between Flint residents and the purposeful actions of the state, we both sit silent for a moment. I hear the blaring of sirens in the distance, getting progressively louder until an ambulance swooshes past the house. I cannot help thinking that the sirens, a sound for emergency, and the situation of Flint residents are connected.

4 The state and its citizens in the water crisis

4.1 The state: producing vulnerable subjects

Below is a snippet from my field diary when I attended a public hearing called *"Lead and Copper Rule Community Meeting"*, organized by Flint Rising, a local coalition of community organizations and probably one of the most visible ones in Flint. In addition to this event, I participated in several others which all made it very tangible to me how real and holistic the suffering of the residents was.

> We are sitting in an auditorium, in a Mott Community College building some kilometers from downtown. The small number of attendees surprises me, there are only some 30 people present, in addition to the few organizers and a man with a video camera and headphones in the front row (probably a local reporter). A young girl, approximately 12 years old with braided hair, hands out water bottles to all the participants. After a quick introduction into the Lead and Copper Rule and some practicalities, the audience gets the opportunity to share their views and experiences.
>
> A black-haired woman from the back row stands up from her seat slowly, it looks like she has a lot of trouble moving. To someone wondering why so few people are present that day, she answers by saying that "So many people are sick, they have a hard time to even get out of their houses...That's why." People around me nod their heads in agreement. She then continues by saying that she is 37 years old, but physically she feels like 90. With shaking hands, she lifts up a big, plastic box to the table and starts pulling out different packages of medicines, showing the audience everything she and her son (born with a medical condition) have to take daily. She blames the government for thinking that people in Flint are like sheep who can be treated in any way the officials want. "I

> pray for every person in this city, every day", she concludes and slowly sinks back into her seat. I feel downright depressed, like a big clump has formed in my throat and is sinking down to my stomach. (Field diary, 22.02.2018)

At the event in question, as well as few others, I came to realize that the question troubling many of the residents in Flint (and me as well) was "Why are so few participating in taking action and holding the decision makers accountable?" Another example was when one day, Carroll called me and asked if I would be interested in coming with her to meet some other people in order to plan a peaceful protest in the city. I agreed and so we sat down at a local restaurant together with Tru, who had initiated the meeting. However, after waiting for a good while, we came to the realization that no one else would arrive, despite that about ten other people had expressed their interest toward the meeting on Facebook. We were disappointed but started planning the protest regardless, while sipping on our coffees.

These two concrete examples from my fieldwork show how the people of Flint were trying to influence the ones in power, organizing, protesting and actively demanding action, all this despite many of them being economically struggling and sickened by the toxins. In this chapter, I answer my first research question: "How do the residents of Flint perceive the state during the water crisis?" I propose that people see the state as separate from them, as a force outside of the society that is being unjust toward the residents and producing vulnerability. Yet the people also understand the state to be fragmented and not consisting of one single force but a multitude of different actors who all played a part in the crisis.

Theoretically, I analyze the complex state/society relations through the lens of citizenship, vulnerability and state processes. After the residents witnessed the state trying to silence them, neglecting their demands about clean water and

taking a long time to act to relieve the situation, the state came to be seen as an antihero. The crisis made people lose trust in the state and see themselves as disregarded and living under vulnerable conditions in a declined city yet trying to be active citizens. Before my analysis, I will provide a brief summary of some theories of citizenship and vulnerability as they are linked to the Flint case. Both concepts are intrinsic aspects of examining the relationship between the residents and the state. According to a prominent view in social sciences, citizenship as a status is formed and transformed in everyday interactions between the state and its citizens. Studies of citizenship might bring out the complex and complicated relationships between people and the state and its bureaucracy, as the case of Flint clearly demonstrates.

One day, I was having a chat with Tru and her friend Beth. Beth tells me that she has been living in the city since 1996 and that her husband used to work for GM, but now he just gets occasional small jobs. *"We just survive"*, she says. We discuss Michigan's emergency management law (which I delve into in the next chapter) and its undemocratic nature. She tells me that she got the enthusiasm to participate in democratic decision-making from her mother, who never missed an election. Beth has done the same all her life (*"And I've been around for a long time"*, she laughs), but now she says that for the first time in her life she feels like her vote does not count, referring to the phrase many young people use as an argument for not voting.

"I literally felt my vote didn't count, because the people I elected were not allowed to do what they were elected for", she tells me, meaning that the emergency manager overruled the city council and its chosen representatives, which in turn lead to cost-cutting decisions, like the infamous water switch. Beth's disappointed comment demonstrates clearly the interconnection between citizenship and democratic decision making, both important aspects relating to the water crisis as well.

“For a strong and well-functioning democracy, the argument goes, ordinary people should be willing and able to participate in the decision-making process that affects their lives as rights-bearing citizens”, writes Takeshi Ito. Citizenship can be seen as a relational process which is shaped by and transforming mundane state - citizen interactions. Ito argues for an approach for studying citizenship that brings into focus the everyday interactions, instead of just the rights and duties of citizens. In practice, though, many groups, such as minorities, women and poor people do not always get to enjoy the full rights of citizenship (Ito 2017, p. 51). The inequality between groups of people is significant in the case of Flint, as the city is filled with economically struggling people and people of color. Many of the people I spoke with said that the state officials are not concerned enough about Flint to help the city, because for them poor and black people are not as deserving as people in wealthier suburbs in Michigan.

Anthropology of citizenship as a theoretical frame often overlaps with anthropology of democracy, yet it is not subsection of it, as citizenship exists in non-democratic societies as well, reminds Lazar (2013). Citizenship, according to him, is used to evoke virtues: Equal rights, engagement between societal actors and citizens and aspects of political participation, such as the right to vote and the right to be elected. Sociologist T.H. Marshall’s definition of citizenship in 1950 still is at the heart of many contemporary anthropological theories of the topic. He defined it as follows: *“Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (*Marshall *1983 [1950]* cited in Lazar 2013, p. 1).

The similarities between studies of democracy and citizenship become clear especially in the ethnographic way of conducting research and its analytic openness. Neither the study of democracy nor the study of citizenship take a certain, normative definition as a starting point, but rather allow it to emerge

through encounters with the people in focus (Paley 2008, cited in Lazar 2013, p. 19). *"Like anthropology of citizenship, anthropology of democracy explores the meanings, practices and languages of political action, as well as the interplay between formal and informal political spaces in specific contexts"*, writes Lazar (2013, p. 19).

In anthropological theory, citizenship is considered to be related to the state, yet not only to the community of the nation-state. The scale of the political community should always be kept in mind: Besides the state, it can be the city or even the global world of today. In analyzing citizenship ethnographically, the location of where different practices of citizenship actually take place is important. In urban settings, these are often public spheres such as demonstrating on the streets, but also various forms of associational activities, where citizens build, negotiate and define the society and sometimes even meet each other violently (Lazar 2016).

One way of analyzing citizenship has been a Foucauldian approach that takes into focus how entities like states make citizens under different regimes. States create citizens through legal, ideological and bureaucratic frameworks that affect practices of political participation and government. One of the most prominent examples of citizen-creating by the state is schooling or education, as national schooling systems are important aspects in the development of a national identity. A popular interpretation of citizenship understands it in terms of the realization of rights. In this view, citizenship *"refers to a relationship between a person and a political community, characterized by mutual rights and obligations, and activated by the role this person plays in the political life of that community. This relationship is ideally enshrined in law, defining the basic rights of the citizen concerning property, identity, security and welfare and protecting individual citizens against the state as well as against fellow citizens"* (Berenschot, Nordholt & Bakker 2017, p. 4-5).

According to Berenschot et al. (2017), it is possible to distinguish three traditions of inquiry of citizenship in social sciences. The first, the liberal version of citizenship has its roots in the 18th century, when individual rights and freedom were first granted for the elite, and then during the following centuries slowly also middle and lower classes were allowed to participate in social democracy. Thus, the liberal version supports a view of citizenship as a gradually formed relationship between individuals and the state institutions (Berenschot et al., p. 5).

The second tradition understands citizenship as a desirable activity rather than a legal status. This republican tradition emphasizes people as capable and willing to take responsibility for their political affairs, thus granting them citizenship as political beings. Traditionally, in the republican view, the state's excessive interference in matters of civil society had to be avoided. This view, however, came to be questioned when neoliberalism gained foothold and advocated instead for *"less state, more market"*. Lastly, the communitarian tradition emerged in reaction to the previous ones, focusing on matters of identity and saw citizenship as a way of relating to a larger political community. Despite slight differences, all three interpretations still share the view of citizenship being a vital aspect of democracy (Berenschot et al., p. 5-6).

An active citizenry relies on aspects such as trust, tolerance and associational activity and the capability and will to hold decision makers accountable. A certain tradition of academic literature, which my thesis contributes to as well, focuses on citizenship as rights-based collective action where groups publicly express their demands to the state for obtaining full or expanded rights. The actions of the citizens are important in achieving democratic accountability (Berenschot et al., p.7). As has been emphasized throughout my thesis, the Flint residents are active citizens who, despite being under very vulnerable conditions, tried to make their voices and demands heard and finally succeeded in it. They wanted to hold the officials accountable, yet slowly lost trust in them

as they did not respond in a way the residents would have wanted. Here I want to quickly consider the topic of vulnerability, closely linked to citizenship. Vulnerability in this case is not just a quality inherent to the people of Flint, but something produced by decades of the state's actions of neglect and austerity policies.

Lenwood is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan-Flint as well as a part of the evaluation team for Flint ReCAST. ReCAST is grant-funded committee that focuses on supporting collaborative efforts to enhance resiliency, mental health and wellness for Flint community members. I met Lenwood at a local Resiliency Summit event I attended, organized by the Genesee County, City of Flint and Flint ReCAST. After the event, as I was putting on my coat and about to exit the building, a woman approximately my age approached me and asked if I would like to discuss the event and give feedback on it. I hesitated, but as I am terrible at saying no, finally agreed to follow her to a room with a few other participants as well. Lenwood was one of the organizers and therefore also one of the facilitators. After the feedback session I introduced myself and asked Lenwood and some other people for their contacts.

Later as we met with Lenwood, he told me about two women who attend his class of public health studies. Both women are mothers and work full-time, in addition to finishing their master's degrees. Lenwood told me that he is very proud of those students as they are trying their best to positively influence the futures of their children, despite the situation in their hometown and the additional stress caused by it.

"They even take their children to class occasionally. Being able to see that, that they will still come to class, because not coming to class isn't an option. To me, that's resiliency, that's agency, growth, a narrative that needs to be talked about more. Especially in contradiction to the narrative of this "poor victim", says Lenwood.

What Lenwood talks about in other words is vulnerability, a concept that has been important in social sciences as it has helped to analyze the role that humans play in producing risks and hazards as opposed to them being "natural". Vulnerability can at its simplest be defined as an indicator of the unequal distribution of hazards and a group's or individual's ability to cope with and recover from a disaster. The temporal aspect of vulnerability emphasizes the fact that for many people around the world, life is chronically insecure. Temporality also means that as human behavior lies at the root of vulnerability, then it must be historically produced. Thus, the background for a disaster begins long before the immediate catastrophic event, as well as continues even after the situation subsides (Faas 2016, p. 14).

The concept of vulnerability emerged in anthropology in the 1970s and it came to replace the concept of the *"savage"* with the *"suffering subject"*, which evoked empathy rather than otherness. Vulnerability still has its uses, but over the decades it has been critiqued for assuming that disaster-affected populations are poor victims without power and agency. As Faas summarizes: *"— — people do consciously engage with political, economic, and hazard vulnerabilities; the vulnerable are not passive bodies on whom labels of vulnerability are imposed, but rather actively engage in the discursive framing of their practices and conditions"* (Faas 2016, p. 20).

Lenwood highlights on several occasions this active agent vs. passive victim dichotomy. He says that he is passionate about helping people to see that survival does not have to be their only option in the traumatic situation. Instead, he wants to go beyond survival and help people to accept the idea of "thriving". As I have demonstrated throughout my thesis, following contemporary theories of vulnerability in anthropology, it is crucial to keep in mind that the Flint residents should not be seen as passive victims in the water crisis.

On the contrary, the active efforts and continuous mobilizing[6] of the locals were the reason that the water issue was finally taken seriously by the officials, even if it did take a shamefully long time for the state to admit that they had failed. Disaster cases like Flint are unfortunate but appropriate examples of everyday vulnerability as an anthropological object of research. Like the temporality of vulnerability makes us understand, people of Flint have for decades lived in precarious conditions produced by the state, where the water crisis was just a happenstance that finally made the city's conditions visible for the world.

4.2 Dispersed and separate from society

When discussing the state and its significance for the water crisis, it is important to define precisely what I mean by "the state". Most of my informants who used the exact word did not point out that they meant the state of Michigan per se (versus the federal republic), yet it was implicitly expressed in their views. In Finnish, there are separate words for the federal republic as a state ("valtio") and the state as a smaller entity, of which there are 50 in the U.S. ("osavaltio"). In English, however, such a distinction does not exist. Therefore, when I use the word state in my thesis, I am referring to the state of Michigan as an actor. I am emphasizing this because as it will be clear later in my thesis, "the state" is not a coherent entity, but a cluster of different actors, and therefore it is important to distinguish the different levels of "the state" from each other.

What became clear to me during my fieldwork, was that the people in Flint blamed different parts of the state for the water crisis. My informants mentioned for example "they", "the officials", "the state", "the governor", "the government", "the ones in power", "the MDEQ", "public health officials" and "the emergency manager law". Yet, even those who told me, for instance, that the emergency manager is the person behind the crisis, understood that the different parts are

[6] For anyone interested in the activism part of the Flint crisis, I recommend the book "Flint Fights Back" (forthcoming) by Benjamin Pauli, a local social scientist from Kettering University who I got to know during my stay.

all intertwined with each other, as the emergency manager was appointed by the governor, the governor represents the whole state, and so forth. My informant Kay summarized my findings quite well: "*I don't think there's one person. There's a perfect storm of systems that were put together that didn't have the right checks and balances. In a climate where financial issues are put ahead of people's issues… There are many people that could've done things differently. "*

Tru held some strong opinions about the situation. *"Now the people don't hold the power, the government do. When the government and the constitution is built for the people, the people are the ones that's supposed to be in control, not the government. The government work for the people, but now… [clicks tongue] The people work for the government. By force"*, she said. Mirroring this quote to my whole conversation with Tru and all the other personal encounters I had in Flint, it is possible to realize how the residents see themselves as separate from the state (for instance, using pronouns like "they" and "we").

Although this state-society dichotomy has been criticized and rejected in contemporary anthropology (e.g. Krohn-Hansen & Nustad 2005), I am here calling for a focus on examining why the dichotomy is still expressed in the everyday language and lives of certain groups of people, like the residents of Flint. Like mentioned already in the theory chapter, I argue that some processes and everyday practices of the state enable such a separation. In the case of Flint, these practices were for instance downplaying the concerns of the residents, refusing to switch back to the old water source and placing financial interests above everything else. All this eventually created a feeling for the residents of being neglected by and separated from the state.

An observation that is crucial in the case of Flint is how there were several different actors and institutions that played a part in the water crisis. The media

discourse has claimed that *"the state failed its residents"* and has thus been reproducing a view of the state as a unified ensemble, when in fact, some parts of the state actually worked to prevent the water crisis from happening. To give an example: Miguel Del Toral, a manager at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), began voluntarily looking into the water issues and doing additional testing in 2015 after a Flint resident contacted him and other experts. Del Toral wrote a long report about the high lead levels and stated that the city had not treated its water with corrosion control chemicals since the water switch – a precaution which is required by the law to keep the river water safe and drinkable. Additionally, the report revealed how the city of Flint was conducting the water testing incorrectly, most likely in order to get the results to show as low lead levels as possible (Clark 2018). According to Tru and Beth who I talked with, the city had told the residents to run the water for several minutes before taking a test sample. (*"Please, that ain't no fresh test!"* Beth exclaimed) Tru stressed that she did not trust the testing conducted by the officials because of how long they had taken to admit that there were TTHMs in the water. In addition to Del Toral, there have been other independent researchers and employees of the state that have had conflicting views. This raises the question of whose knowledge matters in the end, something I will discuss further.

Examples like this illustrate well the complex role of the state and its different entities, where some of them hold conflicting views and which might ultimately result in disastrous situations. The MDEQ had stated that there was no need to add corrosion control to the water at the treatment plant. Even after the federal EPA told the state that Flint must begin corrosion control immediately, the state refused to act, claiming that they needed to monitor the water first for a longer time before changing its treatment. Later, the explanation given by the MDEQ was that they had misunderstood the Lead and Copper Rule and therefore left out the corrosion control treatment. My informant Heather expressed her concerns about the state institutions' conflicting views, saying that *"The Department of Environmental Quality, and the EPA and all of these institutions*

exist in part to be sure that these things don't happen… Except it seems like they actually facilitated it in this case."

Akhil Gupta, studying structural violence and poverty in India, warns us about perceiving the state as a unified entity, instead of trying to decentralize it and see it as fragmented into smaller parts:

> One of the most striking aspects about references typically made to the state, apart from its purposive nature, is the unitary character of the object being described. The state supposedly decides this and does that; the state speaks with one voice, often the voice of the leader; the state stands for the general good; the state represents the collective interests over those of individual ones, and so forth (Gupta 2012, p. 44).

According to Gupta, most analyses of the state reinforce its unitary qualities, even though they criticize its power. The state is described as a dominating or repressive force, and it can be criticized for example for not caring about the poor and not regulating systems of capitalism that result in pollution and inequality. However, people with very different perspectives might still view the state as a cohesive entity. The state should thus be seen as dispersed into smaller parts, and being pulled in different directions by various levels, rather than being an organization acting unanimously with one specific intention (Gupta, p. 46). Following this argument, I am focusing on presenting the state of Michigan in my thesis as consisting of smaller parts which all affected the unfolding of the crisis.

Gupta highlights that an ethnographic focus on the state might help bring forth the diverse levels of the state. A distinction often made in modern nation-states differentiates between the legislative, judicial and administrative functions of the state. It is equally important to think about the location of the state: What is the relationship between the federal level, the regional states, counties,

municipalities, villages and so forth. All three functions mentioned above might be present at each level (Gupta 2012, p. 46). According to him, in research, all claims about the state should start with answering the question of “Which state?” and whatever the claim might be, asking whether it is true for all levels and functions of the state or just those that are being studied (ibid., p. 52). Therefore, I have explicitly stated earlier in my thesis that I focus on the state of Michigan, as opposed to the federal state. Some headlines about the water crisis have falsely stated that the *city* of Flint would have caused the situation, as for example The Guardian wrote in July 2018. I am not denying that some of the city-level officials could have done their job better, but in the end, it was the state of Michigan that made the relevant decisions and therefore also carries most of the blame from the residents.

Gupta also writes about the different agencies of the state and their mutual relations. Often there are separate departments or bureaus serving different purposes, for example education, defense, medical care and housing. Gupta then connects these different departments/bureaus (he calls them “portfolios”) to the spatial and decision-making levels of the state, creating a picture of intertwined parts:

> If one imagines a three-dimensional grid, each of these portfolios may be subject to legislative, judicial and administrative action, and each may be found at federal, state, and local levels. — — What emerges from this depiction of the state is a highly complex array of institutions with multiple functional specializations, modes of operation, levels and agendas (Gupta 2012, p. 46).

There will probably never be a certain way of knowing why the MDEQ opted to leave out the corrosion control chemicals despite the request from the EPA, but there has been discussion about how it might relate to the state’s financial situation. Although the total funding for the MDEQ has increased in the last ten

years, the two subsections most closely related to drinking water quality faced notable cuts between 2006 and 2016. Records show that the total staffing of the MDEQ was slashed 22 percent during that time period. The cuts were made despite that fact that the department has one of the largest numbers of community water systems to regulate (Clark 2018, p. 161). My informant Rebecca told me that she thinks it all comes down to politics and to the state that keeps disinvesting in its departments, which in turn leads to weakened protection for the citizens. According to her, *"People don't want regulations until the regulations are the things that keep them safe."* To her the reason the state is not protecting the residents is the fact that not enough has been invested in the agencies.

Gupta raises the question of intention in relation to examining structural violence against the poor, which his studies have mainly focused on. To quote Gupta:

> This is why intention is a poor place to start in thinking about state violence toward the poor. The state is an incoherent agent for the kind of violence I focus on, and even the vocabulary of indifference raises the ghostly specter of an agent who exercises that indifference. Indifference does not need to be intentionally caused by a particular agent. A disaggregated view of the state makes it possible to open up the black box of *unintended outcomes by showing how they are systematically produced by the friction between agendas, bureaus, levels, and spaces that make up the state (Gupta 2012,* p. 46-47, emphasis added).

Such a viewpoint offers one possible answer to the question of whether the water crisis of Flint was a deliberate poisoning or not, something addressed in the previous chapter more specifically.

The whole situation in Flint invokes the question of Whose knowledge matters? Who gets to say the last word, the officials or the citizens? For several months

after the first signs of something being wrong with the water emerged, the state officials kept discrediting the citizen-science based information the residents had gathered. Many people showed up at protests around the city (especially at the City Hall building), holding up banners and bottles of discolored water they had filled from their own taps. Kay and I talked about the many conflicts there have been in the city and according to her, the conflicts have been mostly between officials and the residents, as people have been so thoroughly desperate to make their voices heard.

Kay referred to one of the classes held at the University of Michigan-Flint, where they organized a whole course on the water crisis in 2016.

> One of the classes, as soon as one person would start talking, he was from the state, you'd hear all this crinkling and you couldn't hear him, it was so overwhelming. People had planned so that they would take their water bottles and go like…you know, this [shows a squeezing gesture with her hand] so that every time he opened his mouth, you couldn't hear what he said. Which kinda told a story of 'There's nothing you can say that we'd believe.'

Kay expressed some sympathy towards the official, saying that she felt it was somewhat unfair, as he had not even opened his mouth yet. What became clear to her was that it is not important *what* someone says, but *who* says it, whether people trust the source of the information or not. *"If it comes from a mouth that's not trusted, it's useless"*, she summarized.

The evidence amassed by independent researchers (like Del Toral, mentioned above) and the experiences of city residents were met with discrediting for months before the state at last admitted its mistakes. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a local pediatric health professional, who I had the privilege of personally meeting during my last weeks in Flint, is one of the people whose knowledge was at first

dismissed. She published her study on elevated lead levels in children's blood in 2015, claiming that the levels had nearly doubled since the water switch. The MDEQ first contradicted her findings, until after some time the officials finally believed her and apologized. Hanna-Attisha told me that many of the Flint activists in the forefront were female, often stay-at-home moms who took the time out of their daily lives to campaign for safe water. As discussed in the previous subchapter, the active citizens of the city were the reason that the state finally admitted its mistakes and started the remediation efforts.

Like the mentioned examples from Hanna-Attisha and other researchers and grassroots activists show, we are faced with a paradox of knowledge: For the residents of Flint, who felt disregarded and disposable, the claims coming from representatives of the state were wrong and did not matter. And on the contrary, the state thought of the residents and grassroots mobilizers as not important enough to listen to their complaints about the water and its collateral effects. Eventually, the state did admit its mismanagement, but the citizens were not pleased with how long it took and claimed that acting sooner could have minimized the damage.

In Western welfare states, the state is undoubtedly seen as an actor working in order to protect its citizens and their wellbeing. But what happens when the state fails to do so? I argue that the Flint water crisis is a prime example of state failure and a significant, unwanted change in the role of the state. The residents of Flint were used to believing in the state's protective qualities and used to getting good water as living in a state known for its freshwater supplies and the Great Lakes. What ultimately lead to the complete erosion of trust towards the officials and democratic decision making, was the state's changed role and its failure to live up to its expectations. The perceived conflict between what the state should be and how it should act (to protect its citizens) and how it in the end contributed to the crisis and its effects.

4.3 The undemocratic emergency management

In this subchapter I delve into the debated emergency management law in Michigan, its meaning for Flint's water crisis and the several problems associated with it. The most notable problem my informants emphasized is the law's undemocratic nature. I also discuss the crisis from the point of infrastructure, a viewpoint that cannot be neglected in the case of Flint. Anthropological approaches to infrastructure demonstrate how infrastructures and their maintenance (or the lack of it) serves as a means of distributing democracy and how ruptures in infrastructures can reveal power dynamics not visible under normal conditions. The poor economic situation of Flint is manifested not only in the water pipes, but in the condition of the roads and the sewer service as well. It is important to remember that undrinkable water and water shortages are a massive worldwide problem, and therefore my thesis contributes to some extent to the discussion on the global water crisis as well.

Several cities in the state of Michigan have a long history of economic and social struggles. Many of us might remember the badly indebted city of Detroit filing for bankruptcy in 2013, thus becoming the largest city in the U.S. to do so. In the case of Detroit, it was the local emergency manager who took such a drastic decision (Rushe 2013). Now, the city is in a considerably better condition: Its debt has been restructured, private investments are in an upward trend and the city's central areas are growing attractive again thanks to various revitalization efforts. Not every city with an emergency manager has seen such improved outcomes, though, as the case of Flint demonstrates.

Emergency management is a state-administered policy used to address issues of financial instability. The idea behind the emergency management is, put simply, to have an outside official who is not constrained by local politics, to make decisions in order to get the city back on solid ground. Emergency managers rely on austerity measures to achieve their objects: preserving the

financial interests of bond holders and finding privatization-focused solutions to problems. They rarely explore how different financial interests and instruments may have caused the economically distressed situation in the first place. David Fasenfest points out that the emergency manager laws in Michigan focus on finding a financial solution to a community's struggles, rather than a social one (Fasenfest 2017, p. 36). It is widely believed that if the EM law had focused more on the welfare of the residents instead of cost-cutting measures, and had it involved the local community better, it could actually have served to prevent, or at least mitigate, the effects of the water crisis.

In 2011 the former Governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, signed the emergency management law, also known as Public Act 4 (PA 4). The law gave the state permission to appoint an emergency manager without having clear evidence of a city's economic problems. The manager would not be responsible to anyone, but the governor and the law thus removed the governing powers from the elected local officials in cities. As Fasenfest puts it: *"That is, a state takeover of a municipality, which suspends the decision-making authority of a local government's elected leaders, could be initiated based on the sole discretion of the governor and other state officials"* (Fasenfest 2017, p. 37). Also Clark notes it in her book about the water crisis: *"Not only was the risk [of the water crisis] mortal, it was shaped from the start by the unusual political context of the city. Under emergency management, Flint didn't have the power to make decisions for itself"* (Clark 2018, p. 122).

The rights of the managers were met with strong resistance from Michiganders. The people wanted to reinstate the old fiscal responsibility act law and therefore voted for a repeal of the law P4. However, the state responded by modifying the law and making it referendum-proof, that is, unrepealable (Clark 2018, p. 6). My informant Carroll was actually the first source from where I learned about the EM law. As we were talking, she let me know that she does not consider the law democratic at all and phrased her thoughts about the law this way: *"It seems to*

me that there should be a constitutional vote on that [laughs]. If our legislators are supposed to be acting on our behalf and that is not what we want… I'm incredulous. The emergency manager law absolutely is responsible for our crisis."

Flint was appointed an emergency manager in late 2011, after a review of the city's finances. The first manager reduced the salaries and powers of local officials and city employees and eliminated over a hundred positions altogether (Clark 2018, p. 8). Finally, after several different managers and a devastating water crisis, Flint was turned over to an advisory board in April 2015. The Receivership Transition Advisory Board (RTAB) is an entity appointed by the governor, which continued to review the city's financial decisions according to the EM law. In spring of 2018, the city took another step towards independence as the city's elected council was given back its power, for the first time since 2011 (Goodin-Smith 2018).

Many people in Michigan have opposed the emergency manager law, calling it unconstitutional and racist, as most of the cities that have ever been under an emergency manager are majority-black cities. According to a lawsuit, in 2013, 56 % of Michigan's black population had lived under emergency management, compared to the 3 % white population (Gordan 2017). Robert, one of my informants, stressed this racial aspect of the emergency management law, as well as commented on it being undemocratic. He summarizes well the thoughts of the majority:

> Flint's a poor black city and it was very easy to do that in a period of time when we had zero representation. Because when the emergency manager was here, and we had several of them, all your rights are gone as a community. There's no democratic process left. Emergency manager makes every decision, and citizens have no course of action to say 'No, we don't want that to happen'.

He then continues with noting a fundamental aspect of the role of the state in the crisis, something that I have discussed throughout my thesis. Here I am quoting Robert again: *"The real big thing is, when you're poor, when you're disinvested in, predominantly people of color community, it's real easy to be written off. The state could not get out of here faster. And they tried like crazy to get out even sooner than they did, they're still here to a certain extent."* All my informants seemed to be very aware of what was happening in their home city and the role of the emergency managers in it. I asked George about the EMs and he, fond of using metaphors, answered me like this:

> Bea: What do you think about the EMs and their part in this?
>
> George: Those are the reasons why this happened. If I put duct tape over your mouth and allow you to move but you can't talk… Emergency manager takes away your vote, your voice, takes away your power and authority. You really can't do anything even though you're kickin' and screaming. Whatever they do or say, it is what it is. That's what the rule of law is gonna follow.

Robert (like I believe many others in Flint) seemed to be sure that the water crisis was not an inevitable incident and could have been prevented. He said the following:

> You know, it was about money and power. And had not the emergency manager been there, had it been a local official, I don't think they would've been so quick to have jumped to do something like that [changing the water source]. Because you know, I'm responsible to you, the people. The emergency manager was only responsible to the governor. Only person in the whole state that he was responsible to. It

> was easy for them to do what they did, without concerns about how this is actually affecting people.

As can be seen, the emergency management law was among my informants seen as unfair and robbing the democratic decision-making process from the city, thus making the people think that the officials are not to be trusted. The EM law and the managers' decisions are a part of a larger state policy that focuses on cutting costs and narrowing the power of making decisions to a few people.

When talking about the Flint crisis as a crisis of democracy and economic wellbeing, the discussion should not be constrained to water problems: there is a need to take into account all the other collateral problems related to water governance. The water system is an intrinsic part of city infrastructure, and as infrastructures play a significant role in producing or diminishing democracy, I thus want to discuss briefly the city's infrastructure from an anthropological perspective. I argue that the governing of infrastructures, in this case letting them go unmaintained for such a long time, is one way for the state to create inequality and vulnerability. Appel, Anand and Gupta mention Flint in the introduction of their book The Promise of Infrastructure (2018):

> In Detroit and Flint, the centrality of municipal debt, the privatization of public goods and services, and the market-led governance might lead us to view both as typical examples of neoliberalism in practice. But in both cities, the water shutoffs were as much a result of longer struggles that date back to the 1930s as they were of more immediate pressures emanating from Wall Street. — — The state-sanctioned infrastructural abandonment that ensued over the following decades is coded today as the product of financially irresponsible residents on whom austerity and dispossession can justly be visited (p. 2).

Infrastructures and their material and political lives shed light on issues of technological progress, economic growth and equality between people, often revealing ruptures in relations between people and the institutions that govern people and infrastructures (Appel et. al. 2018, p. 3). In the case of Flint, the crumbling water pipes revealed above all the terrible condition of the city's economic situation and the unequal relationships between the state entities and the poor locals. Some of my informants held a view of *"water as an equalizer"*, claiming that the same, lead-tainted water flowed into every home in Flint, regardless of the person's income level and skin color. Others, however, strongly felt that certain city areas with lower income levels and a higher amount of people of color were more subjected to the effects of lead, than others.

The water infrastructure in Flint was originally built to serve over 200 000 residents, the population it had during its heyday in the 1960s. However, after deindustrialization and loss of population hit the city, only a part of the water network remained in use and the rest of the pipes were left untreated. It is also important to remember that besides residents, the broad network of water pipes was built to sustain the many automobile plants in the city. Now the infrastructure still needed to be kept up, even by a population that was shrinking and becoming poorer. Austerity regimes by the state of Michigan have further withdrawn public funds for building and maintaining infrastructure. Therefore, it was just a matter of time when something would happen to the pipes. Like Pulido accurately writes: *"In this case, infrastructure is the manifestation of past wealth and capacity, and its eroding status, which is actively being produced in the present, signifies the politics of abandonment. Crumbling infrastructure is where past economic regimes meet the present"* (Pulido 2016, p. 4).

It might be hard for someone with not much knowledge about the water crisis to grasp how all of the things mentioned above relate to each other in the end. In my opinion Anna Clark summarizes it well in her book, illustrating the vicious circle that Flint was trapped in:

> Flint's infrastructure was in a death spiral. The water rates were expensive because the pipes were bad because vacancy rates were high because the city had been shrinking for so long. — — Then there were even fewer people to pay into the system, which meant that there was even less money to maintain it, which meant that [water] rates went up further. Repeat ad infinitum (Clark 2018, p. 36).

It has been widely argued that the deterioration of the pipes is not just a Flint or Michigan thing, but a nation-wide problem. According to a study by CNN, over 5 300 water systems, serving almost 18 million people in the U.S., violate the federal regulation for acceptable levels of lead and copper (The Lead and Copper Rule) (CNN 2014). Many of the locals seemed to be aware of this nation-wide phenomenon, like my informant Rebecca. She put it as follows when we talked about people's interest towards Flint's crisis slowly declining: *"People do still care and worry about the city, but it also really elevated the need for cities all across the country and in the world to address similar issues they may have in their infrastructure."*

Also, Shayne noted the larger problem of poor water quality and he assigns the blame on those who built the old lead pipes a long time ago:

> So yeah, this is a very unreal experience. Especially seeing other cities dealing with the same, if not worse water, but no one standing up for them. Chicago is bad, Louisiana, I've heard it's really bad down there. I think what we're seeing is… They're calling it the great generation, the baby boomers, well, they messed up when they built infrastructure out of lead pipes.

The neglecting of infrastructure is apparent not only in the water network, but in the condition of roads and sidewalks for pedestrians as well. A kind of national joke in Michigan are potholes, deep caves in the road caused by erosion. Like an Uber driver laughed when I concernedly asked about the condition of the

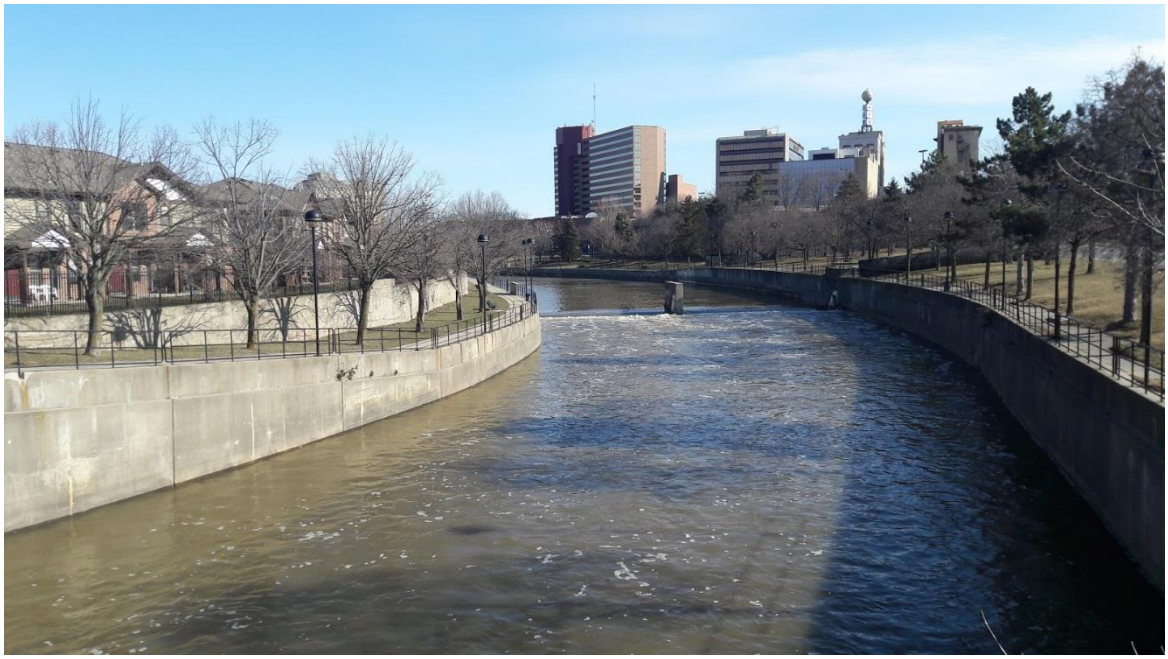
roads: *"Oh, potholes? Well, those are just a Michigan thing!"* He seemed to take it lightly, but I had already heard and read quite a few stories about potholes destroying cars and getting entire buses stuck in them. The fact that sidewalks only cover the immediate city center forced me to rely on Uber and occasional buses in the city. Also, Rebecca mentioned potholes and the fact that the road infrastructure is not the only one crumbling. She says that she believes that I had already noticed their terrible roads and how people always talk about that something needs to be done to them. Rebecca says Flint has an equally bad sewer and drinking water infrastructure but because it is underground and not visible, the residents do not really think about it until something like this happens.

Appel et. al. argue that the governing of infrastructure is equal to governing the (unequal) politics of life in its entirety. To cite the authors more precisely:

> Infrastructures are a critical site through which politics is translated from a rationality to a practice, in all its social, material, and political complexity (Humphrey 2005). They are a material and aspirational terrain for negotiating the promises and ethics of political authority, and the making and unmaking of political subjects. Because infrastructures distribute vital resources people need to live — energy, water, information, food — they often become sites for active negotiations between state agencies and the populations they unevenly govern (Appel et. al., p. 21).

In this chapter I have examined the relationships between the state of Michigan and the residents of the city of Flint. I propose that how the residents see the state is formed through everyday processes of the state and how the state officials treat the locals and their complaints about the water situation. The locals wanted to believe in a state that advances the interests and safety of its citizens, yet they lost trust in it and came to see the state as an undemocratic enemy trying to silence and marginalize an entire city. Not properly maintaining

the water infrastructure played a big role in the crisis, as the technical reason for the situation was the corrosive river water meeting the old lead pipes. Thus, the governance of the infrastructure was for decades just another way for the state to apply its cost-cutting politics. The financial politics and austerity measures of the state are what I focus on in the next chapter, where I bring forth a picture of a state applying private sector neoliberal policies to governing a city and thus producing poverty through strict austerity regimes.



The Flint River, photo: Bea Bergholm

5 The state of Michigan as a neoliberal actor

In this chapter I wish to continue the analytical discussion on how my informants understand the actions of the state in contributing to the water crisis, now extending it to the austerity-based financial decisions the state has made throughout the years. I answer my second research question, "How did the city's history of economic difficulties affect in the background of the water crisis' emergence?" In the first subchapter I will look at some anthropological theories on neoliberalism and discuss them in relation to my own research findings about how the locals view the state's business-approach to governing the city. In the second subchapter I extend my discussion to two phenomena closely linked with neoliberalism, namely, austerity policies and state debt. I trace back the history of cost-cutting measures in Michigan, in order to better understand the forces behind the initial water source switch. I also want to remind the reader that the previous chapter on state policies and this chapter on neoliberalism cannot be entirely separated from each other, as I have consciously pieced together both concepts throughout the thesis.

5.1 On "running the state like a business": Michigan's neoliberal policies

As stated before, this case in point is not a very straightforward example of neoliberal economics. The first thing that usually comes to mind when hearing the term neoliberalism, is privatization, the work of big multinational companies and the free market. In the case of Flint, however, there was no big, international corporation that polluted the city water without the interference of the state. Instead, in this case it was the state itself, acting according to a neoliberal policy, which places financial interests and cost-effectiveness above everything else. Also, I do want to highlight here that the preconditions for the water crisis had been there for decades as a part of the city's history. The actions of the state officials were only what triggered the crisis and made it immediately felt and known.

I have already defined my use of the term neoliberalism in chapter 2 and here I am situating it more specifically in the context of Flint. The next quote from Ferguson aptly summarizes the kind of neoliberal state policies that were the root cause of the Flint water crisis: *"Neoliberalism, in contrast, puts governmental mechanisms developed in the private sphere to work within the state itself, so that even core functions of the state are either subcontracted out to private providers, or run (as the saying has it) 'like a business'".* He continues by arguing that neoliberalism deploys market-based techniques of the government and instead of blurring the boundaries between state and market, uses these market-focused procedures within the terrain of the state (Ferguson 2009, p. 172).

My informants echoed this kind of view about the state functioning as if it was a profit-focused company, cutting costs in order to increase profits. A similar viewpoint has also been brought forward in the media: For example, The Guardian wrote on January 23rd of 2016 about the crisis with the title *"How Flint traded safe drinking water for cost-cutting plan that didn't work"* (Felton 2016). Depending on whom of my informants I asked, the blame for the situation seemed to fall on different parts of the state, as the state in this case is not seen as a coherent entity (see previous chapter). Michigan's emergency manager law and the state-appointed managers in Flint did get a considerable part of the blame as the people in Flint accused them of running the state like a business. Like my informant Cameron put it: *"I mean this is not the first time we had an emergency manager. They're all about money, that's the thing. In their eyes, our people, it's a business to them."*

George talks about the former governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder (in position 2011-2019), who has been widely portrayed in the media as the biggest culprit for the water crisis. Here, too, what is apparent, is a critical attitude towards the state officials placing economic interests first:

> He's economically driven, which is great, we all need the money, we need a state that is very attractive to the rest of the world, but you can't disconnect one from the other as leader of that level. You have to have a balance, have the interest of the people, have to understand that economics is important, understand the demographics which you're serving, because as a leader you're more of a servant than a dictator. Dictators are those that tail people and get what they want. But a leader serves their people and gets the results they're looking for.

A considerable amount of research on neoliberalism bears on the issue of the state in a neoliberal age and I have elaborated on this neoliberalism-state-connection in chapter 2. The state is unquestionably an inseparable part of neoliberal policies, but is the state weakening or strengthening in the process? Earlier studies of neoliberalism emphasized the retreatment of the state from its role in regulating the markets, yet a more contemporary view is that instead of withdrawing, the state is intervening in market regulation in critically different ways than before (Kingfisher & Maskovsky 2008, p.117). So, on one hand the state can be seen to weaken and on the other hand getting stronger in some respects. Competition and maximization are fundamental principles of the neoliberal state and a strong state is the prerequisite for securing competition (Hilgers 2012, p.81). Here I am quoting Mathieu Hilgers on the role of the state:

> The state is thus both more present and visible, but at the same time more absent and weak, capable of coercion through informal measures (violence, threats, intimidation and firing recalcitrant civil servants or sending them to remote posts) but incapable of fulfilling its social obligations. In certain cases, we see a state that is expanding and even becoming stronger in some ways. Yet its weakness and porousness are revealed on a daily basis. The state thereby shows itself to be not an

> apparatus, but a set of processes that are not always linked to institutions – or that, in any case, cannot be reduced to these (ibid., p. 85).

The close relationship between the state and neoliberalism is the main reason that I am focusing on both theoretical aspects in this thesis. In the example of the Flint water crisis the state seems to be both stronger than before (as the operations of state officials were what ultimately caused the lead to leak into the water), yet also reducing its power and downright failing, as the main popular discourse of the water crisis implies: *"Flint Water Crisis: How Michigan failed its people"* declares a headline from the MLive news page on January 21st of 2016. In addition, all of my informants strongly felt that the state had let them down and failed in fulfilling its task as protecting the citizens.

As I have already made clear, the Flint case is not a textbook example of neoliberal policies, as the crisis lacks a company/privatization-focused aspect. Yet, a somewhat more typical aspect of neoliberalism becomes explicit when looking at the relationship between GM and the state during the water crisis. In the summer of 2014, workers at the GM engine plant in Flint noticed that their engine parts were rusting, and they associated it with the Flint River water. Soon after that, the company wanted to make a switch on their own, to make a contract with the suburb of Flint Township which was still on Detroit's system. GM promised Flint that they would return to the city water and the new KWA pipeline as soon as it was completed.

However, they needed the permission from the city first to make the switch and the emergency manager of the time accepted the company's request easily, together with several other officials who were cooperative about GM's demands. The same could not be said for complaints from the residents. The officials kept ensuring that the problems with the water plant could be fixed and that it would be too costly to switch back to the Detroit system, even though people were demanding it (Clark 2018, p. 63-64). Here we see how the neoliberal state

policies were working during the water crisis, in this case prioritizing business interests over human health. Dewaun summarizes his feelings about the GM's water switch this way: *"What they [GM] did was changed over and then used the [Detroit] water. You know, humans are using the [Flint] water, but the car parts, they using a different water source. So that can tell you a lot right there."*

An incident quite similar to that in Flint happened in 2000 in Canada. The city of Walkerton, Ontario, faced an E.coli outbreak, which poisoned the city's water, resulting in 7 deaths and over 2000 people being infected. Behind the outbreak were the city's neoliberal governance forms as well as the practices of municipal officials who were mismanaging the city's water supply. In the early 1990, the government of Ontario was facing deteriorating economic conditions, which forced it to adopt neoliberal fiscal reforms. Environmental spending suffered some of the deepest cuts and was restructured. This and several other factors contributed to the water contamination in the town (Prudham 2007).

A parallel can also be drawn between the Flint case and Hurricane Katrina that devastated New Orleans in 2005. The root cause of the disaster was not the hurricane itself, but the deteriorating levees that were supposed to protect the area from flooding. The federal government had been under the influence of big private actors and therefore diverted funds towards other things than the levees (Ortner 2016, p. 54, see for example Adams 2012). The Flint water crisis is thus not a single, tragic case in point, but just one example of a myriad of similar cases of environmental and human rights injustices happening all over the world due to a belief in the superiority of neoliberal administration.

A major part of the discussion on neoliberalism is focused on its negative effects (especially for the already marginalized populations), and my thesis is no exception to that discourse. Anthropologist Carol J. Greenhouse summarizes the reverse side of neoliberalism as follows:

> — — Along with structural adjustment and soaring capital accumulation among the newly wealthy come permanent impoverishment and divided communities; privatization is accompanied by social fragmentation and democracy deficit; market values do not consistently sustain public services; outsourcing contributes to the destructuring of local economies and displacement of workers; liberty may take the form of abandonment; deregulation permits loss of accountability; unemployment and routinization of work allow the development of novel forms of alienation; the marketization of institutions creates improvised forms of empowerment and social reconstruction; national investments in global capitalism facilitate new regionalisms and— for citizens— new subalterities and risks of marginalization and insecurity (Greenhouse 2010, p. 1).

According to anthropologists Catherine Kingfisher and Jeff Maskovsky, there have been a few dominating paradigms in anthropological studies of neoliberalism. The first one, greatly influenced by Marx and Harvey, views neoliberalism as an attempt to restore capitalist class power (Kingfisher & Maskovsky 2008, p. 118-119). According to Harvey, the result of neoliberalism has been the growth of inequality on a national and global scale: A few individuals are amassing wealth, whereas poor people get even poorer and the middle class is struggling. A phenomenon he famously described as *"accumulation by dispossession"* (Harvey 2005, p. 159). Similarly, Ortner argues that neoliberal policies are degrading the working class and the poor, and this attitude of derogation is manifested in the shrinkage of the state and the reduction of its social services. *"Thus beyond deindustrialization we see a kind of more active war on the poor, again documented ethnographically in a number of sites and contexts"* (Ortner 2016, p. 54).

This “active war on the poor” as an explanation came up several times as I asked the people I met about why they think the water crisis initially happened in Flint. The answers were downright depressing as they echoed feelings of marginalization, insecurity and worthlessness, aspects that are among the many negative consequences brought by neoliberalism, as described above by Greenhouse and Harvey. This is how Cameron answered my question, capturing what so many other people think as well: *“It really don’t matter, cause ain’t nobody gonna care about Flint. — — We was already having a lot of crime and stuff, already in the poverty rate. What can hurt, basically here we already know the situation, I think they basically didn’t care.”*

George had similar thoughts about the socioeconomics (Flint being majority black, with high poverty and unemployment rates) playing a part in the background of the water crisis. He phrased himself as follows: *“Anytime you have under-educated population, it’s a target. You’re going to get people that are going to be misused and used.”* Some other informants expressed their feelings by referring to *“those who matter and those who don’t”* and noting that the officials were *“not recognizing our value as persons or human beings”*. Carroll says that the switch should never have happened in the first place but it happened because Flint was *“a town on decline”*. Shayne expressed probably the darkest vision of all, saying that *“Everything that came out of Flint was forced to go bad.”* Geographer Laura Pulido has researched the Flint case especially from the point of racial capitalism and this is how she summarizes the situation: *“The local state, completely engulfed in the culture of neoliberalism and austerity, chose to respond to an urban fiscal crisis by poisoning its people. It felt it had the latitude to do so because its residents simply do not matter – they are disposable”* (Pulido 2016, p. 8).

I believe that the other one of Harvey’s central claims — neoliberalism as restoring power to the elites — is in this case supported by the feelings of all those who have first-hand experience of the huge gap between perspectives of

the Michigan governor and the people of Flint. George told me his views about Rick Snyder, saying that Snyder is a white, wealthy person who has had only privileges in his life and that there is no commonality in him towards anybody that voted for him. (*"Except maybe for the five hundred people that have the same amount of money."*) According to George, it's impossible for most of the people to relate to Snyder on any level, even those who claim to be able to do so.

I asked Lenwood for his opinion on the governor. His thoughts seemed to be similar to those of George's: *"And his [Snyder's] lack of awareness as to the decisions that were being made. You were voted in to not be the governor of just the best parts of Michigan, but you were called to be the governor of all of Michigan. You were not called to be the governor of the rich, but everyone."* Also Carroll agrees with the others, telling me that according to her, the governor has enjoyed too much luxury and does neither understand nor care what the people of Flint are living through. To her it seems almost like the governor is insulated from responsibility, which she finds saddening. During my fieldwork, it became very clear to me how much of a disliked figure Snyder was in the city. One evening I attended a film screening at the university of a documentary film called *"Nor Any Drop to Drink: Flint's Water Crisis"*. There were approximately 60 people in the auditorium and when Snyder's trial was shown on the film, the audience booed and laughed loudly and mockingly.

Disliking and feeling alienated from the governor, believing the crisis was actively done to the poor people of Flint, and feeling like the local auto manufacturer was more worthy to the officials than the people were, all these stories from my informants demonstrate how the locals saw the state not just as an unjust force, but a neoliberal one that used private-sector policies in its own work. I argue that in addition to perceiving the state like a neoliberal actor, the long history of economic struggles in Flint should be considered when answering the "why?" of the water crisis. I have already throughout my thesis

explained the deindustrialization of Flint, and in the next subchapter I want to add some more details to it before drawing it all together.

5.2 Austerity policies

As has become clear by now, the ultimate reason for the lead poisoning was the emergency manager's aim to cut costs and the rushed decision to switch to the Flint River while waiting for the Karegnondi pipeline to be finalized. But why did Genesee County need to construct a new pipeline basically duplicating the already existing one? There will probably never be a certain way of knowing how much the decision to build the KWA contributed to the water crisis happening, yet I want to briefly address it in this subchapter, as it relates to the city's neoliberal policies and austerity measures.

In 2012, when the KWA was just a plan on paper, it became clear that the project needed to get the city of Flint on board. There was a problem, though, the fact that Flint did not have the financial possibility to do that because of its debt. The CEO of the KWA and its leading proponent, Jeff Wright, argued for the pipeline as an economically-sound way to break free from the Detroit system and establish a more self-sufficient way of using the resources from the local river (Guyette 2017). In addition, it was seen as a way to aid economic development in the region as it could provide water to a variety of new businesses.

Michigan's Department of Treasury commissioned two different consulting firms to assess what would be the cheapest option for Flint's water source, but the companies' findings were conflicting. Followingly, the city of Detroit was asked to come with a new offer, but despite promises of reduced water prices, it was rejected by Flint's emergency manager at the time. The appointed EMs were most likely in favor of the new KWA pipeline, even though it was not economically sound for Flint to participate in it. This is what Curt Guyette, a

reporter for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan writes in Metro Times:

> Flint was broke. That's no secret. The city's dire financial situation is the reason the state came in and took control in 2011. The city of nearly 100,000 people had a $13 million deficit and no credit rating. So, when the decision was made to join the Karegnondi project, the question became: Where will the city constrained by state-imposed debt limits and no interest from bond sellers come up with $85 million needed to pay for its share of the costs to build a pipeline from Lake Huron to Genesee County? (Guyette 2017)

Carroll raises the same question as we speak about the causes leading up to the water crisis. She phrased her doubts about the KWA as follows: *"So this is what did happen. I think we were less than 20 million dollars in debt when we got our emergency manager, or at least by the time they made the decision on the KWA pipeline. My question is, how was it that we were approximately 20 million dollars in debt and it was saving us money to commit to a 120-million-dollar pipeline?"*

The rest of Genesee County continued on the Detroit system as they could afford it, but Flint was unable to pay for its share while simultaneously building a new pipeline and making improvements (yet not all the essential ones) to the water plant (Guyette 2017). Eventually, the state arranged a work-around for Flint to make it possible for the city to commit to the pipeline even though it had hit the maximum debt allowed by law. The construction of the pipeline began in June 2013 and the 300-million-dollar project was estimated to cost Flint about 85 million (Clark 2018, p. 162-163). The bewildering question is, why did the city commit to a new pipeline, yet refused to do the needed upgrades for the old water plant to function properly and safely? Carroll tells me that the water treatment plant was not back in 2014 nor is at the time of our talk, prepared to

process the corrosive river water and she criticizes the decision to disregard repairing the plant for money-saving reasons.

To make matters worse, after switching the water source to the Flint River, the raw water should have been treated with corrosion control chemicals at the water plant. However, the staff at the plant had been told by the MDEQ that there was no need for corrosion control, not even though the plant had not been sufficiently upgraded (Clark 2018, p. 33). Rebecca's comments on the matter are very similar to Carroll's. She says the following: *"Whoever made the decision to forgo adding the corrosion control to save money. And I don't even know if that was the reason they did it! It was a negligible amount of money. Whoever did it, signed the death mark for so many people. That one boggles the mind."*

Indeed, in the case of Flint, the decisions made in regards of the water distribution were very short-sighted and it would have cost the state significantly less to upgrade the plant and/or use corrosion control chemicals than to deal with the consequences of the lead poisoning and destruction of the water pipes. According to some estimates the corrosion control would have cost approximately 140 dollars a day (Lynch 2016), whereas fixing the infrastructure will cost, depending on the estimates, up to a staggering 1,5 billion dollars (Reuters 2016). And this is only the cost of the new water pipes, excluding all other costs such as water and filter distribution, health services and legal fees for lawsuits.[7]

Disinvestment in environmental safety, running state operations like a business, cutting costs on all sectors and listening to and prioritizing companies' demands rather than the undervalued residents', are all aspects of neoliberal governance.

[7] I want to stress that it is impossible to give reliable numbers of the estimated costs of the water crisis. Therefore, I have had to rely on several media sources in order to get a tentative picture of the costs, often categorized as social and material costs separately.

At this point of the thesis, I want to introduce another important concept relating to the water crisis, something that can be seen as serving as a backdrop for the state opting for neoliberal policies. Namely, the concept of austerity — a topic not very broadly studied in anthropology until very recently, at least according to my knowledge.

"Austerity" is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as *"ternness or severity of manner or attitude"* or more suitably in this case as *"difficult economic conditions created by government measures to reduce public expenditure"*. Geographer and political economist Jamie Peck describes austerity in the 21st century as follows: *"In the 'entrepreneurial city', municipal governments act as cost-saving business actors that run their cities like corporations"* (Peck 2015, 1). Flint is an example of a city that has had to turn to austerity policies, which in turn resulted in less investment in the city and fewer services for the people.

Austerity is a response to market conditions and it involves the state cutting finances from cities and often targeting the most vulnerable of populations. Government downsizing and increasing privatization are signs that austerity is a part of the neoliberal agenda (Peck 2015, 2). Peck emphasizes how this kind of development is prominent in the whole United States but especially in cities — therefore the term *"austerity urbanism"* he uses. Cities are relying on public services such as housing, transportation and various infrastructure. Cities are also the homes for suitable targets of the austerity programs: the disadvantaged, minorities and marginalized populations (ibid., 3). In the case of Flint it is clear that because of its long history of economic decline, abandonment of capital and the notable black population, the old Rust Belt City was a good candidate for such policies.

"The pundits of austerity present it as morally neutral, as a remedy for fiscal malaise, to use medical terms. Despite the fact that the remedy is proven to be deleterious, it keeps on being prescribed", writes anthropologist Theodoros

Rakopoulos (2018, p. 6). His definition of austerity is very similar to the ones mentioned above and in addition, he highlights the unequalizing effects of austerity measures. Austerity works as *"a form of financialization of everyday life"*, which aims to *"change social formations and re-evaluate the worth of people's lives"* (Rakopoulos 2018, p. 2).

The media coverage of the water crisis has repeatedly highlighted the discussion about Flint versus other, better-off communities with a larger white population. The juxtaposition between richer people and the disinvested people in Flint was also echoed during my fieldwork. As my informant Robert put it:

> I don't think this would happen in a middle class, rich, white community. Because if the infrastructure failed, the denial won't be there. That's the big thing that happened here. Infrastructure failed, and everybody denied it had failed. If it failed in a white community, I don't think there would be that big of a denial. It was easy to write us off. Because there were emergency managers sitting here, we couldn't take care of ourselves, we ran ourselves into bankruptcy, all these things, 'You're bad people, you don't know what you're doing'.

I see this kind of discourse and beliefs as an example of austerity measures *"re-evaluating the worth of people's lives"*, as Rakopoulos put it in his text, obviously re-evaluating them as less valuable than they used to be. I would say that every one of my encounters with people in Flint somehow reproduced this belief that the people are not worthy of the officials' or state's protection or promises. Dewaun called the whole situation *"inhumane behavior"* and said that the officials looked at Flint *"as a throwaway"*.

As General Motors left Flint, the city faced the fourth largest population loss in the whole country within just ten years, from 2000 to 2010. For the first time since the 1920s, the city was home for less than a hundred thousand people. Normally, a state redistributes some of its sales tax profits to local governments to help the cities pay for their public services. In the case of Michigan, between

1998 and 2016, the state needed to fill gaps in its own budget instead and therefore Flint lost a significant amount of public money — an amount that could have eliminated the city's deficit and paid off its debt (Clark 2018, p. 5).

Anthropologist Laura Bear reminds us in her book *"Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt Along a South Asian River"* (2015) that debt crises in the world are not a new phenomenon: In places like South and East Asia, Latin America and Africa, people have indeed lived through times of state debt and austerity already since the 1980s. Current policies focusing on cutting public spending should be seen as a part of a longer history of sovereign debt. According to her, these crises have been given surprisingly little attention in accounts of neoliberal policy: *"Neoliberalism is often presented as a response to economic crisis, rather than as a redefinition of fiscal policy as primarily a financial question"* (Bear 2015, 7). Bear writes that a few important aspects should be considered when examining debt crises: What types of practices of the public good are generated when the focus is on financial distress? And secondly, how are for example class relations, politics and environments affected by a financially focused policy? (Bear 2015, 7)

Bear wants to create *"greater precision in debates about historical changes in economy that are often labeled 'neoliberal'"*. She shares the current view in anthropology that neoliberalism is not a unified project, but rather techniques and institutional structures brought together. She argues that several of the changes in public policies termed as neoliberalism are linked to state debt and alterations in the mechanisms and relations of it. Therefore, a contradiction between the redistributive and extractive aspects of state institutions is created, which in turn leads to austerity policy, which Bear describes as *"decentralized, creative, short-term and chaotic"* (ibid., 7).

My thesis could be said to follow Bear's arguments, as I am writing about neoliberalism and austerity policies (adopted by the state of Michigan) as inextricably linked together, as parts of a longer historical process of

deindustrialization and abandonment of the city of Flint. In the case of Flint, there was no major economic crisis that triggered the decisions made about the water source as a money-saving measure. On the contrary, the state had been disinvesting in the city since the slow collapse of the automobile industry started in the 1970-80s. Therefore, my thesis brings together four major aspects in order to understand holistically the background forces in the water crisis: the state, austerity policies, neoliberalism and history.

6 Conclusions

In this thesis I have examined the Flint water crisis from the perspective of the residents and how they experience the state of Michigan and its processes and policies affecting the crisis. I have focused on the twofold process of the state – citizen interaction: How the citizens see the state and its role and on the other hand, how they perceive themselves as defined by the state's actions and processes. Throughout the thesis, I have provided several perspectives and answers to my research questions presented in the beginning. My questions *"How do the residents of Flint perceive the state during the water crisis?"* and *"How did the city's history of economic difficulties affect in the background of the water crisis' emergence?"* have been answered in several different chapters and here I want to draw it all together.

So, *"How do the residents of Flint perceive the state during the water crisis?"* I construct my answer to this question in three parts. Firstly, the city residents perceive the state of Michigan as a separate force acting from the above and taking the control out of the hands of the citizens. As opposed to being on the side of the residents, my informants see the state as working against them and the Rust Belt City they are inhabiting. The city was subjected to a very undemocratic decision-making process regarding its water management: As the governor set the emergency manager law in action, the city committee lost its power and thus the entire city became voiceless.

Even as the locals struggled to make their voices heard, showing up at protests and official meetings, they were systematically disregarded as the officials claimed that the water was fine. The people in Flint believe that the state justified its actions to itself by pleading to the fact that the residents are mostly economically disadvantaged and people of color, thus not worthy of protection and investments from the state. Through the interactions with the state, the locals also came to see themselves as placed under vulnerable conditions, in "a

city that didn't matter". As suggested by the several interviews and encounters cited in this thesis, the locals felt like they were disposable, of no value to the state officials, and not worthy of such protection as the state is supposed to provide to its citizens. However, I propose that despite of how the state treated them, the Flint residents stood up, took action and remained active agents in the precarious conditions they have been subjected to throughout decades.

Secondly, in addition to being "above" the society, the state is perceived as dispersed, consisting of several actors on different levels. My informants recognized that the different parts played different roles in the crisis, as opposed to the state being a unified entity. This view is supported by an anthropological theory of the state, which argues that the state should not be seen as a coherent unit, but as consisting of parts with potentially different agendas (discussed in chapter 4). In the case of Flint, the different actors had contradicting views about the water management in the city. The federal EPA advised the MDEQ to use corrosion control chemicals for the water, yet the MDEQ refused. Additionally, some officials had warned about using the Flint River or the old water plant for treating the water, but their views were ignored in the decision-making. Seen this way, the conflicting views of the state were in the background of the formation of the crisis. I am once again quoting Gupta, arguing that the crisis was at least partly caused by *"the friction between the levels that make up the state"*.

Finally, I propose that my informants see the state as a neoliberal actor that placed business-like governance and economic interests above human health and safety. In chapter 5 I discussed neoliberalism practiced by the state, a mentality developed for the private sector that is put to use in the public sphere as well. As my informants emphasized, the state was governing the city as if it was a business, thus first focusing on cutting costs and advancing monetary interests and only then considering the wellbeing of the residents.

The neoliberal governance is closely tied to the city's history of decades of economic abandonment and austerity measures, which brings me to the answer to my second research question: *"How did the city's history of economic difficulties affect in the background of the water crisis' emergence?"* Ever since the late 20th century as GM left the city and its deindustrialization began, Flint was not seen as a place worth investing in. A city full of impoverished people and no jobs as the big industries had pulled out, Flint was not seen as attractive enough from a neoliberal viewpoint. And when it was not economically interesting for new companies and new people, the officials felt like they could disregard the city in their decisions.

I propose that the big, economic transformations and the slow deindustrialization were at the root of the water crisis in 2014. As the city's tax base was constantly declining and the state put money in its own pockets instead of trying to lift up the struggling city, Flint soon needed austerity measures in order not to go bankrupt like Detroit. Austerity policies and strict cuts meant that there was not enough money to keep up the crumbling infrastructure and invest in safe water management. I argue that the man-made Flint water disaster was the culmination of a historical process where several forces joined together, and the decisions of the emergency manager were actually just the tip of the iceberg. I propose that the long history of the city's bad economic conditions in fact *produced* vulnerability, poverty, and the demographics the city now has, which in turn made the state turn its head away from a city that was no longer financially attractive.

The close relationship between neoliberalism and the state is inescapable in the case of Flint. A question often posed in theoretical literature about neoliberalism concerns the role of the state and its strength as an actor. Traditionally seen, the state is weakening as it gives space to businesses and privatization. Yet in this case, I argue that the state, instead of strengthening or weakening per se, in fact *became more like a business* itself. This argument is supported by what my

informants said, as they referred to the state acting like a business and focusing on balancing the budget as opposed to serving its citizens. The locals saw the state as being unsuccessful in fulfilling its social obligations of protecting the citizens, thus it was seen as failing and weakening. On the other hand, the state also strengthened its grip of the city, assigning an emergency manager to govern and take all democratic decision making away from the locals. The state tried to keep up its role as a benevolent father meaning to help, yet it failed, silenced its children and made them lose trust in it.

I believe the Flint case is a prime example of what happens when a city is left to its own and the abandonment by the state can and will change the residents' understanding of themselves and the state that governs them, eventually leading to a complete erosion of trust. Despite having all my life lived in a very different place than what Flint is, I believe that what happened in Flint could happen again, basically anywhere in the world. Thus, the Flint case can open new perspectives to seeing what can happen if states and governments do not invest in shrinking cities and only focus on neoliberal cost-cutting. In this thesis I have looked at the water crisis from the local residents' perspective. However, if I were to continue my research about the crisis, I would be intrigued to explore the other side of it: the state officials' perspectives. What did they think? Did they feel like they had no other options but to change the water source? How have their lives changed since the spring of 2014? Those questions, however, will have to wait for another time.

The early spring sun is about to set, and it is time for me to leave George's house and let him get ready for his doctor's appointment. We discuss the future of Flint and I ask him whether he thinks the people are still willing to fight for their rights. Even though I have seen the devastation of the city up close and felt it in my heart, George's answer gives me a spark of hope. He says:

No, residents of Flint, regardless of how under- or uneducated or regardless of how old or regardless of how ignored we are, we're not gonna stop fighting. Because we put that spark in this country to fight, you know. There will be no middle class, there will be no standard in living, there will be no corporate standards without the residents of Flint. Period.

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I'm proud of being a Flint resident, proud of being born here and to have that history. Just as I believe you're probably proud of being Finnish. There are certain facts about this place that won't ever change. We have a proud history.

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